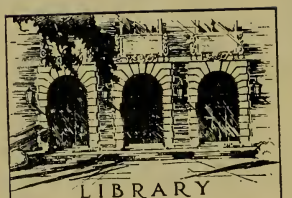

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Children's Children

FIRST VOLUME

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CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

A STORY OF TWO GENERATIONS

BY

ALAN MUIR

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1879

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CHILDREN'S CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

D.D. AND M.D.

'WILL your patient die, Doctor?'

'Except there should be a miraculous interposition of Providence he cannot recover.'

The question was asked by Doctor Spout, and answered by Doctor Puff. Doctor Spout was a Doctor of Divinity, and his friend—as appeared from the conversation—a Doctor of Medicine. The physician was a man of portentous aspect, tall, with a pro-

digious nose; and, indeed, his whole frame was gigantic, so far as the structure of bone went, though the covering of flesh laid thereupon was scanty. Doctor Spout, who was minister of a fashionable episcopal chapel, was a short man, rosy and plump, who might have been on good terms with life, only that his outrageous pomposity would scarcely suffer him to be on good terms with anything. These two professional gentlemen were very good friends, as worldly friendship runs; and, as a large number of highly respectable people departed this life under their joint supervision, they were constantly coming across each other. Doctor Spout would say of Doctor Puff that he was a man who could do everything except restore life; and this remark being conveyed by some common admirer to the ears of Doctor Puff, he would raise his cane, and hold it horizontally in the

air, moving it slowly upwards and downwards, as if he were weighing some matter in his mind, and would say, in his big solemn style, that since the days of Hooker he did not believe there had arisen a divine who gave you the real marrow of our Church—'sober, sir, no fanaticism: all calm and elevating'—as did Doctor Spout. So these two often met over the bed of death; and it was pleasant to behold the urbanity with which the physician would say that, 'Here, sir, after all, your profession is more potent than mine;' while the divine, with a courtly bend of his little barrel-shaped body, and an expostulatory wave of his hand, would reply that, although we could not be quite sure from ecclesiastical history when the age of miracles ended, it had most certainly terminated before the present time.

These two gentlemen stood together in a

spacious dining-room, the windows of which looked out upon the park of the city of Warcaster. The room was long and stately, and furnished in a fashion of gloomy antiquated grandeur. In the pauses of the conversation, a timepiece on the sideboard seemed to tick with unusual gravity and emphasis; and there was a silence in the house—not the silence of emptiness or repose, but that particular sort which tells you at once that somebody lies dying upstairs.

'The case is hopeless, then?' said Doctor Spout, continuing the subject, as nothing else suggested itself to his mind.

'The case is hopeless, and has been since the commencement,' replied Puff. 'Nothing but strength of will has kept him alive these six weeks. He *will not* die, sir: he does not choose to die. That, however, cannot go on for ever: Nature will

step in at last, and have her say in the matter.'

As he spoke a young lady entered the room. She was richly dressed, but in a very plain way, her intention evidently being to let the world see how stylish she could be, if she cared, and how little she cared to be stylish. Her features were large, and by no means handsome; and her deportment was that of one who despised feminine softness. She met the polite advances of the gentlemen with responses so cold and brief that, had the two not been equal masters of the art of smiling when one ought to wince, some mortification must have broken out in their faces.

'My father will see you now, Doctor Puff,' said the young lady in a voice which had much the same relation to music that her face had to beauty.

'Might it not be desirable for Doctor Spout to precede me on this particular occasion?' remarked Puff, well knowing that this respectful offer would not be accepted.

'My dear sir—my dear sir!' cried Spout, raising his hand. 'Such a thing must not be thought of; let the poor body be first attended to.'

The physician said no more, and followed the young lady out of the room. She led the way upstairs, and he ascended, with great dignity, at the pace of one step to her three. There was no fear of making a noise on these stairs, for they were of stone, and carpeted so that the foot sank deep at every silent step. Far overhead a skylight threw down the brightness of the sunny March afternoon upon the walls, which were ornamented with wreaths and garlands, wrought in stucco, and tastefully picked out in colours.

Amidst all these signs of luxury, there was a desolation about the house, which the bright light did not chase away, but rather increased by contrast. The stately doctor reached the sick man's room, and the young lady, softly opening the door, let him pass in.

The air was almost stifling, for the windows were carefully closed, and a great fire threw its heat into the room, and its big tongues of flame tossed up the chimney. In the very centre and glow of the heat, a large arm chair, with upright sides, was placed, and here sat an old man, wrapped up as one might be who was making a journey on the outside of a coach on a winter day. Little was to be seen of him except a hooked nose, and a pair of wonderful eyes, dark and piercing, and full of life and observation. These looked out from beneath a pair of shaggy brows, and their light seemed brighter for

their being sunk so deep. The doctor drew a chair to his patient's side, and the patient looked at him fixedly as he sat down, but made no sign of recognition.

'What is the report to-day?' said Doctor Puff, with his bedside air of importance.

'Dying,' replied the sick man, in a harsh voice, from which his daughter's must have been imitated. 'Dying—not dead, and not alive.'

'Now, does it occur to you that we can do anything for you?' asked Doctor Puff, who seemed to feel some difficulty in dealing with his patient.

'It occurs to me,' answered the other, speaking laboriously, and making a wry face, as he shifted himself in his chair, 'it occurs to me, that you have attended me for twenty years without doing anything for me, and that you are not very likely to be of much service now.'

'We are only servants of Nature,' remarked Puff, humbly enough. 'We may coax Nature: we cannot domineer over her.'

'Coax her then!' cried the sick man, moving in his seat again, with a gasp and a writhe. 'Coax her to make seventy-two years fifty, and to put vigour into a heart that beats more feebly at every stroke, like the pendulum of a clock which has run down!'

'We can do but little, I fear, sir,' said the physician.

'You can; you can!' said the patient, showing two long yellow teeth, and snarling like a dog who cannot bite, 'just as much as ever you did. You can look on, and prate, and go away with a guinea in your pocket to some other fool's house.'

The doctor turned to the young lady.

'He must take his drops every three hours, as before, and the brandy whenever he

feels faint. Don't be afraid to give the brandy freely.' And so saying he rose to go.

'Good-bye to you,' said the sick man. 'I shall not see you again, I dare say. You will be like me some day soon. I could wish to be living then, to see Doctor Puff feeling the pulse of Doctor Puff, and telling him that "we can coax nature." How much comfort the expiring physician will get out of that. Oh, you will make a fuss over your dying, depend upon it. All doctors do—and all hangmen. Good-bye, and a pleasant death to you—like mine—like mine!'

Doctor Puff left the room without saying another word; only when he found himself outside the door, he made a peace-offering to his own offended dignity by shrugging up his shoulders, and elevating his eyebrows, in the sight of the young lady, thus expressing his opinion that the patient was in a childish

state, and must be humoured and pitied. No sooner had he left the house than Doctor Spout was brought into the sick man's presence.

'I have come to see you, my dear sir,' he softly began, 'because you have for so long a time attended my ministry.'

'I never heard you preach six times in my life,' said the sick man, in the same waspish way that he had met the last visitor. 'And I wish I had never heard you at all.'

'You have had a pew in St. Dunstan's Chapel these fifteen years,' said Doctor Spout, disposed mildly to argue the point.

'Yes—for visitors,' replied the other; 'and for such members of my family as were fools enough to go.'

Doctor Spout, knowing his man by reputation, showed no surprise or irritation at this unseemly behaviour; but he sat in silence, for really it was not easy to reopen the con-

versation. The sick man relieved him of that difficulty.

'I should not have allowed you to come upstairs,' he said, speaking more freely, and with less appearance of suffering, 'only that I wished to tell you that I am dying, and——'

'Let us hope not,' cried Spout.

'Pish!' exclaimed the sick man. 'Please spare me that: you know I am dying. I wished to tell you that I believe in your religion just as much as I believe in your friend Puff's medicine—that is, not at all.'

'My dear sir,' said Spout, with a soothing motion of his hand, 'you must not say such things. You are worn with suffering, and do not read yourself aright.'

'My mind is clearer now than ever in my life before,' was the answer. 'Foolery and knavery never seemed so easy to detect. I tell you I am dying—I know it. In a few

days' time, at most, this shawl around my shoulders will be more of a reality than I. I shall be perished, dissolved, gone. Well now, look here: I have performed all the duties of life. I defy you, or anyone, to show that the choicest of your saints has been more punctual in discharging every proper moral obligation. I can say like your own prophet—"whose ox or ass have I stolen? whom have I defrauded or oppressed?" To all this I simply add that I don't believe one syllable of your religion. Now, Doctor Spout, what have you got to say to a dying man like me?'

'It is my duty to tell you—my duty,' repeated Spout, marking the word by a severe emphasis, 'that you are in a very alarming position.'

'But not, you observe, the least alarmed.' The sick man seemed to enjoy

maliciously the unmistakeable perplexity of the clergyman. 'I remember on one occasion you told us in St. Dunstan's Chapel, that an unbeliever could not die in peace. What do you say now? Will you have the honesty to correct that statement publicly next Sunday? I am as much at peace as any dying man can be—more so than many of your saints. Now go, Doctor: I am tired. Not another word, if you please. I know what you would say. Go—go.'

Little Doctor Spout rose from his seat, and for a moment he seemed to meditate a reply. Perhaps the angry look which the sick man cast at him convinced him that discretion was better than valour, for he said nothing. He, too, however, like Doctor Puff, felt he must vindicate his dignity, and took the opportunity, when bidding the young lady farewell, of saying—

'I judged it more prudent not to argue with your father in his present state. But, if he expresses any desire for the consolations of religion before his decease, send for me.'

The young lady's only response was a stiff 'Good morning,' and Doctor Spout walked away, smoothing his ruffled self-esteem with such reflections as the case and his own ingenuity suggested.

CHAPTER II.

NURSE AND PATIENT.

The name of the dying man was Robert Bolton. He was the only son of a wealthy merchant, but had never been engaged in trade himself. Indeed, his tastes were the opposite of commercial, and, his patrimony being very large, there could be no reason why he should pursue an occupation to which his family had already devoted itself for three generations. Robert Bolton loved books, and, like Prospero, he found his library large enough for his ambition. Accordingly he married, and settled down in the city of Warcaster. His wife, whom he loved

greatly, died in childbed, and he was left with one son, for whom he conceived the most rooted dislike, insisting on regarding him as the cause of his mother's death. Bolton's temper had always been morose, and after the loss of his wife his manners became almost unbearable. He could scarcely meet an acquaintance in the street without letting fly at him some speech of pointed rudeness; and in company he would wait for an opportunity—or even make the opportunity—of insulting any timid or unprotected guest. This bearish habit caused him to be generally hated; yet—such is the cowardice and servility of society—it procured for him a certain kind of respect; and persons who passed through an interview with him, and were not insulted, felt as if he had paid them a compliment. Bolton was wealthy, and gave good dinners; he was learned, and

wrote with considerable ability on historical subjects. By these respectable qualities he obtained, in spite of his brutalities, as much deference and civility as he cared for. Five years after the death of his first wife he married again, and for a long period was one of the leaders of Warcaster society, his wife—a notable woman in the drawing-room—contriving, as often as he wounded the feelings of a guest, to mollify the smarting place with the ointment of her courtesy. At last she too died, having borne a son and a daughter; and from that time Robert Bolton fell into a secluded way of living, and avoided company, while we may be pretty sure company would be at no great pains to court him. It ought to be added, that in his opinions he was as singular as in his manners, though here his eccentricity ran out in a new form. He was a violent Tory in politics, and in

religion, as may have been surmised, an unbeliever, and even a 'destructive.' But this state of mental amphibiousness was more apparent than real: his political opinions were, in reality, class prejudices, while his thoughts upon religion were genuine convictions.

When Doctor Spout took his leave, Miss Bolton returned to the dining-room, and sat down to resume a half-finished letter, which she had been vainly trying to conclude during a disturbed morning. She had scarcely dipped her pen in the ink before a kind of thumping knock at the door announced a new distraction. Miss Bolton was not naturally of a placid disposition, and her face and voice were in concord as she cried out ill-temperedly, 'Come in.'

The door opened, and a singular figure appeared. A short and stout woman—so

short and stout that she might have been geometrically described as five feet by two and a half—made her way into the room with an awkward motion, as if she were shoved from behind. This personage was so far remarkable in mind and body that the reader may pass an idle moment in looking at her portrait.

Deb Hathway she was lawfully entitled; but by her equals she was familiarly styled Mother Dumpy, in playful allusion to her outward appearance. Her limbs were massy; her chest and shoulders of prodigious bulk; her head was small; and her nose—which between her eyes scarcely existed at all—threw itself into abrupt prominence from the centre of her face. To these charms she added a complexion which would have matched that of the ruddiest apple that ever took its colour from the sun, and an aspect of

physical strength which might have caused the heart of a prize-fighter to die within him. Her eyes were her most striking feature. The rolling humour, the natural shrewdness, which those dark dancing orbs displayed, would have drawn off attention from worse defects than any to be found in her homely, honest face. Her speech, of which she was no niggard, offered to the listener such a puzzling succession of west country words and pronunciations, that to many it would have been an unknown tongue, for Deb had never been to school, and the few score words of rough dialect she knew by ear formed her sum of learning. But Deb—as her eyes declared—was no common woman. In the sight of an educational reformer she might, indeed, appear little better than a brute. But as heroes lived before Agamemnon, so women flourished before reading-

books. Deb had her faculty, and it was for sick-nursing. For miles round, and in many a chamber which she entered with awe—so costly was the furniture, and so awe-inspiring the carpet, in which her broad sole sank deep—Deb bore the character of queen of sick nurses. Spruce ladies'-maids drew their skirts aside in scorn when they met Deb shouldering her way upstairs, and fine footmen grinned at the disclosures of vast ankles and immeasurable calves which she made in her ascents; but when once she reached the sick room she was in her own kingdom, and none disputed her authority. At any hour, day or night, whenever duty called, Deb answered the summons. She was always hale and rosy; the twinkle never departed from her eye; it was equally impossible for a patient to resist her will or to be angry with her. She could lift a sick man in his

bed like a baby, and when the attenuated frame was sinking in upon itself, Deb's brawny breast would prop it up so deftly that he would half believe the strength to be his own. In a word, she accompanied her charges down to the very gate of the grave with unflagging courage and good-humour; and when they glided through the dark portals, Deb would let fall a few honest tears, and one or more of those rude sentences which set forth the rustic moralist's philosophy of death—

'There! it's what us all must come to—be'ent it?'

When Miss Bolton looked up, and saw the in-comer, she smoothed her harsh features, and even suffered a smile to break out on her face.

'Well, Hathway, have you had some sleep?' she asked, for Deb had been trying

to repair the losses of the night by an afternoon nap.

Deb mumbled some reply indistinctly, and stood nervously twitching her apron, like one who has something disagreeable to say. She glanced up at Miss Bolton, and then down at her own hands, and, if any such change were possible in her bright complexion, she blushed.

'I can't stay in this house, miss,' she said at last.

'What is wrong? Have any of the servants been rude to you?' asked Miss Bolton, knowing that Deb, like Falstaff, was a cause of wit in others.

'No, miss, no,' replied Deb sturdily. 'If they was, do you think I should mind? It's the master: such a gentleman *I* never saw. He scolds and swears, and you're wrong if you sit still, and wrong if you

move about. So many bad words I never heard: it's a wonder he remembers them all.'

'This is your trouble, is it?' said Miss Bolton, with a relieved air. 'You need think no more about the matter. Mr. Bolton means nothing by it: it is his habit. Attend to your duties, and take no notice of what he says.'

'I can do anything for them that's kind wi' me,' said Deb, shaking her head, 'but I can't be swore at.'

Miss Bolton fixed her large grey eyes on the nurse, and, after a moment's thought, bid her take a chair.

'You have quite enough standing when at your work,' she remarked. 'Now, Hathway, listen to me: I wish you to wait upon my father, because I know you will take good care of him. His manner is new to

you, but I can assure you he is all goodness and kindness.'

'Is he really, miss?' asked Deb, who was not a courtier. 'I should not have known it from himself, miss!'

'My father,' continued Miss Bolton, clasping her hands and speaking as much to herself as to Deb, 'My father is a perfect man! I never knew him do anything wrong, —never.'

Her expression softened, and her eyes, occupied with some scenes that she liked to look upon, and insensible of what was actually at hand, moistened and lit up with a brightness that memory alone could have shed upon them, at that particular moment.

'A few hasty words—a little impatience —what does that denote?' she said, after a pause, becoming conscious, as it seemed, that she was not alone. 'All his life he has

been making war against falsehood and folly, and his manner has grown a little snappish—only his manner. At heart he is now what he always was—kind, because he is just and affectionate, because he is truthful. Don't be uneasy about anything he may say, Hathway; you can't understand him, but he means no mischief.' At this Miss Bolton smiled mechanically.

'He do swear at me, however,' said Deb, sure of her fact, if of nothing beside.

'And what is swearing?' replied Miss Bolton, with the air of one talking to a child. 'Only a boyish habit, which clings to some people in later life. The words have no meaning, and no one knows that better than my father.'

Deb Hathway appeared not a little puzzled with this reasoning, which she but faintly comprehended. Like better taught

persons, however, she felt the force of the argument most where she least understood it.

'Well, miss,' said she, beginning rather to excuse herself, 'I thought I had better speak to you, because you see, miss——'

'Quite right, Hathway,' cried Miss Bolton graciously. 'At any time when you are in a difficulty you must consult me. Be as attentive as you can to Mr. Bolton, and do not mind his hasty words. He is in great pain, and I think he is near his end. He has cares and disappointments of which you know nothing—irritation of mind, which tries him more than any bodily suffering.'

Miss Bolton's voice became grave, and even pathetic, when she spoke of her father's sufferings; and though she restrained herself, like one who considered emotion a fault, Deb could see how deeply she was moved. The nurse's rough honest heart melted.

'Whoever thinks ill of him, you won't, miss,' she said, breaking out in this sally of admiration before she recollected herself, and then frightened at her own presumption. 'We must do the best we can for him, poor gentleman, while he is here; and if he must swear, he must; only I should send for a minister, if I was you, miss, and he might talk to him a bit, and make his mind easy. When my patients goes on like that, I always say—"Send for the minister."'

'I think, Hathway,' said Miss Bolton drily, 'we had better leave Mr. Bolton to himself for the present.'

CHAPTER III.

'WILT THOU HAVE THIS MAN?'

DEB HATHWAY left the room, and Miss Bolton sat down once more to her unlucky letter, of which she had written only a few farther lines, when she was again disturbed. This time a servant announced that Mr. Charter was in the drawing-room, and would like to see her. Miss Bolton bade the servant say she would appear directly, and then, throwing herself back in her chair, she put the feather of her pen to her lip, and meditated.

Mr. Charter was a younger son, with two fairly sound lives standing between him and

a large and wealthy estate. He bore two very opposite characters, and the reader, having considered these, may, if he pleases, say for himself, in due time, which suit of opinions fitted the wearer best. Certain of his friends declared that he was a true Christian man, whose life and habits were a perpetual sermon; that he carried tracts in his pocket wherever he went, and improved every occasion; that missionary meetings, church work, and schools, all found in Mr. Charter an invaluable supporter; with a multitude of kindred testimonies. Other friends—or perhaps we should say acquaintances—would ask, If he was altogether as free with his money as with his patronage? If his domestic tempers were of the real Christian pattern, or of any Christian pattern at all? If there were not stories about certain members of his family lying in sore need

on the common way of life, while Mr. Piety walked by on the other side? Some scoffers would even go so far as to ask his admirers whether, after all, they would not prefer praying with him to bargaining with him? This gentleman, thus variously esteemed, was looking out for a wife, and had for some time kept his eye on Miss Bolton. Being twelve years her senior, and an old friend of the family, he had nursed her on his knee when her little years might easily have been counted, and her petticoats were only a foot long, and at this time he commenced the practice of calling her by her Christian name, Diana—a practice which at the present more ticklish period he felt pleased to continue. Diana Bolton had very little of the young woman about her: she despised accomplishments, read hard, knew everything, and to crown what may be called her anti-woman-

hood, she had a logical mind, and never missed her point in an argument. Still she was a woman, and being so, she soon found out, upon the revival of their friendship, that Mr. Algernon Charter admired her. She was but little moved at the discovery; indeed, if she had heard the following day that her Algernon was drowned, as dead as Pharoah, she would not have augmented the wateriness of his fate by one solitary tear. For all that she was by no means displeased with him for liking her, and may even have allowed some half-frozen ideas about marrying him, at some time or other, to nestle in her breast. At the present moment the announcement of his name sent a rapid procession of thoughts about the past and the future through her mind. Instinctively she felt that his visit must be matrimonial in its purpose; and as she sat nibbling the end of her pen, she

planned an answer to the proposal which she anticipated.

Mr. Charter wore solemn black, and Miss Bolton was dressed in colours scarcely less sober; and the austerity of his expression was in no way relieved by any excellence in his features or figure, while, as has been said, she was in no sense handsome. Their salutation, too, was stiff and lifeless; and altogether they looked like persons who might be trusted alone, for any length of time, without the least danger of love coming in as a third party. But that great master can play on all kinds of instruments, and just as a skilful violinist will extract ravishing music from an ancient and faded cremona, so will love snatch up a dry and withered human heart, and fiddle his own particular tune upon it to the amazement of everybody. And at this moment love—or his twin-brother, self-

love—was making his little bow ready for a performance on the heart of Mr. Algernon Charter.

He made a few inquiries after the health of his friend Bolton, and shook his head gloomily at each answer. When he had in this way performed the offices of courtesy, he lost no time in passing to the business he had in hand.

'I am leaving England next week,' he remarked. Miss Bolton felt that by this announcement he was paving the way for another of a more interesting sort.

'Are you?' she replied.

'Yes,' he continued, 'I go for a tour over the Continent—all through Europe in fact—which will occupy the best part of a year.'

'Don't you think you had better stay longer than that,' observed the lady, 'and see everything thoroughly?'

'Continental travel is not free from danger,' said Mr. Charter, not caring to notice the last remark. 'Change of climate—change of diet—damp beds—to say nothing of more direct sources of peril—all unite to make such pleasures—profitable pleasures though they be—causes of serious anxiety.'

'If you are frightened,' said Miss Bolton, 'you had better stay at home.'

Mr. Charter looked crestfallen, and even annoyed, at these frigid replies. But he kept his temper, as even ill-natured people do when they have an end in view.

'I call for a special purpose to-day,' he said, with a serious air. 'I have something to say which, under ordinary circumstances, I should not mention at a time when your feelings must be overwrought.'

'Pray do not consider my feelings,' observed Miss Bolton, in her stony way. 'I

can give you my whole attention.' At which inspiring words the suitor brightened up.

He made his proposal. Mr. Charter was quite enough a man of the world to know what note he should strike on such an occasion, and no fault could have been found with the speech in which he declared his passion. He told Diana that she was a sensible and solid woman, who might well play the part of companion in life to a man very much his superior. Of beauty, or the passion beauty kindles, he said nothing—and wisely, for Miss Bolton had sternly settled in her own mind that her charms were not personal. Mr. Charter spoke of judgment, and sober views of life, and literary tastes, and true womanliness, and the lady listened. Then, warming a little, he described his own feelings. He was not a man for rhapsody, nor she the woman to regard it; enough to

say he esteemed her, and—loved her. Here Diana Bolton raised her eyes, and regarded him, with no disfavour certainly, yet curiously, and with a faint smile. 'Very well, Mr. Charter,' she said. 'I understand you. I will marry you, if you like.'

He was scarcely prepared for so sudden a surrender, and mustering up his raptures hastily, found himself something like a general taken by surprise, who calls his forces together all in a hurry and disorder. 'How fortunate I am,' he cried. 'What happiness!' and as words failed him at this point he prepared to kiss the lady, for even he knew that in love a kiss can convey a volume of meaning. But Diana did not choose to be kissed just yet.

'I said, if you like,' she continued, holding up her hand in a way which signified that the salute must be postponed.

'When you hear what I am going to say, you will in all probability withdraw your proposal.'

Mr. Charter was on the point of protesting that nothing could induce him to change his purpose, but he caught Miss Bolton's cold eye, and the words petrified on his tongue. She marked his hesitation with a smile.

'I shall inherit a large fortune,' she began.

'For that,' cried Charter loftily, 'I care nothing.'

'But whoever marries me,' continued she, pursuing her speech, without noticing the interruption, 'must consent to see the bulk of my fortune applied to public uses.'

It was all in vain that Mr. Charter tried to conceal his consternation at this announcement. The most finished disciple in the

school of Chesterfield could not maintain the graces if the hose of a fire-engine were to begin playing on him suddenly : no more could Mr. Charter preserve his equanimity after such a disclosure. Deeper, and more sarcastic, grew Miss Bolton's smile as she saw the despiser of fortune stammering and reddening under her gaze.

'I was right about your proposal, was I not?' she asked, refraining from any irony of tone, and making her words more cutting by that very abstinence.

'Are you going to found a charity?' asked the discomfited suitor, scarcely knowing what he said.

'I will be quite candid with you,' replied the lady. 'My father has for several years occupied himself in the composition of a work —a set of works, I may say—on a subject of the greatest importance. His opinions are

not popular, but they are true and wholesome, and will serve the world. However, I need not speak of that. My fortune is to be spent in printing and circulating his books.'

'But, Diana,' cried the other, recovering himself, 'do you not know that any book which deserves circulation will be sure to circulate itself?'

'I know nothing of the kind,' answered Miss Bolton, losing her temper a little. 'But I am not going to argue that point. I have told you how my fortune is to be used. My husband will touch very little of it—a tenth, perhaps, but no more. Now, Mr. Charter, do you wish me to be your wife?'

'As I told you a moment ago,' he replied, 'I did not seek your money when I made this proposal——'

'Let us consider that fact settled then,' remarked Miss Bolton.

'Nevertheless,' continued he, 'there is another weighty matter, which you have yourself introduced. If your resolution about publishing and circulating your father's writings is fixed——'

'Consider that settled too,' she cried sharply.

'Then,' said Mr. Charter, 'it would be my duty to ask what those writings are, Diana. I have the greatest respect for your father's moral character, but his opinions are, I fear, not only erroneous, but pernicious. Has he been writing on religious subjects?'

'Certainly,' answered Miss Bolton.

'In that case,' said the other, 'I could be no party to the diffusion of such productions.'

'You need not be a party to it,' she replied. 'I could make all the arrangements for the future before we married, and the subject need never come before you.' She

smiled as she said this, and a gleam of real fun shone for a moment on her harsh, frosty face.

'Diana,' said Mr. Charter, shaking his head gravely, 'you must forgive me if I say that you draw a very jesuitical distinction.'

'Algernon,' she answered, looking him full in the face, and speaking with the utmost composure, 'you must forgive me if I say that you have a convenient conscience. I wonder what excuse you would have hit upon for not marrying me, if I had told you that I was going to spend my fortune on Christian missions! However, I think we understand each other. I live for this world because I know of no other; you——'

'Diana,' cried Mr. Charter, 'don't be profane.'

'You,' she went on, 'talk about another

world, but you take very good care to keep a tight hold on this.'

The interview closed coldly, but with tolerable civility. Mr. Charter went his way in very ill humour, muttering to himself peevish complaints against the piercing March wind, which, as it whistled down the dusky street, and found out chinks even in his comfortable clothing, seemed to find out chinks in his temper too. Diana Bolton meanwhile went upstairs, and got ready for dinner, looking as unlike a young lady who had just been solicited in marriage as it was possible for any person of her age to look.

CHAPTER IV.

'BIRDS IN THEIR LITTLE NESTS.'

When, about half an hour later, Miss Bolton entered the dining-room, she was met by a new visitor. At sight of Diana he came forward, and greeted her heartily, and yet with a certain timidity, as if doubtful how his advance would be met. His misgivings were not unfounded, for when he offered to kiss her, she drew herself back with so morose a look that he at once dropped his hands, which had been stretched out for an embrace. But he began conversation with cheerfulness, taking no notice of her very palpable rebuff.

He was a little over the middle height,

dark, and decidedly handsome. His forehead was perhaps large in proportion to his other features, but it was well shaped, and his nose and mouth were cut with remarkable beauty. His complexion was high—not rosy, but of that deeper red, just shading into purple, which is the after-glow shed on convivial faces by the ruby rays of wine. He wore clerical attire, and had altogether that particular air of good living and good breeding which we associate, not unkindly, with our clergy. This was Mr. Bolton's eldest son—Death Bolton by name; for so his father had called him, under the pretence of remembering a distant relative, but really as the first outlet for the dislike which, through his whole life, he nursed against a son whose fault was that he innocently caused his mother's death Strict orders were issued through the household that the child should never be known

by any name except 'Master Death;' and when he grew to manhood the same rule was kept in force: all the servants spoke of 'Mr. Death.'

'Well, Death,' said Diana, laying on the name a particular stress which she never omitted, 'so you have come—at last.'

'Really, Diana,' said he, with an air of concern, 'I did not understand from your letter that my father was so ill. Indeed, I should not have been here now, only that a friend told me his decease was expected every hour.'

'I wrote all that appeared to be necessary,' remarked Diana, scarcely concealing her indifference. 'You know it is not my habit to write sensation letters.'

'How is he this evening?' asked Death.

'Much the same.'

At this point the conversation was in-

terrupted by the appearance of the second son, Hercules. He was tall, and, like his brother, good-looking, but there could not have been traced any nearer resemblance between the two. Hercules was of fleshy build, and his face that of a man who liked good feeding and good sleep, and got plenty of both. There was a certain good-nature in his look, but, when you searched out his face, the better part of the expression seemed to evaporate, and what remained was only fat satisfaction with self, and with life. His manner was pompous and artificial, and he shook hands with his elder brother in a way that was half condescending and half apathetic: Death Bolton was not a person of much importance in his father's house.

It was plain that the two juniors considered their elder brother an intruder, and none could have said which seemed harder

to bear, the wordy condescension of Hercules, or the froward manner of Diana. Death, however, did not notice either, but talked on pleasantly, though, as he grew more and more at ease, his sister's frowns became darker. She watched, scowling, while he with significant readiness tossed off the glass of wine which accompanied his soup, and when a second glass went as rapidly the way of the first, she tried to let him see the sarcastic smile into which she forced her lips. In this she altogether failed, and presently Death glanced at his empty glass.

'Tite,' said the observant Diana to the butler, catching at the opportunity, 'pour out Mr. Death's third glass of wine.'

Death looked up, smiling, as if the thing rather tickled him.

'Very neat and delicate for a reproof!' he cried. 'But really, Di—,'—Miss Bolton

winced at the abbreviation—'I cannot live without a liberal supply of wine. I work hard, and am by no means as strong as I look. If you would only teach me how to live on water, you would find me a willing pupil.' Death sighed as he spoke, like a man who sees trouble at a distance.

Whether chemistry, among its other wonderful discoveries, has found out a way of making bitter more bitter by adding sweet to it, it is not for us to say; certainly Death's reply to her sarcasm, though delivered with the most engaging good-humour, caused his sister to look sourer than ever. She bent over her plate, and for the time abandoned the conversation. Hercules, who had been busy with his dinner until now, and thankful that the others let him alone, noticed the silence, and felt that he must say something. Accordingly, he began to talk about his

brother's parish, asking questions, but not listening to the answers, the better to show that he was urbanely stooping to these petty matters because Death had an interest in them. Death, who had not a particle of pretence in his nature, and was beside full of pleasantry, seemed amused rather than annoyed by all this magnificence, and he waited with a smile fluttering about his lips for an opportunity of punishing his brother.

'To my mind,' said Hercules, at last, in his heavy, important way, 'you clergy do considerable service. You have the ear of the poor, and I have little doubt that your influence over them tends to keep things quiet between class and class.'

'We prevent the working class from asking inconvenient questions about the idle class, you mean,' replied Death, with twinkling eyes. 'Only imagine, Hercules, if Tite

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were to begin inquiring why, in the nature of things, he must stand behind your chair, and you sit upon it; or why he must get up at six, and be on his feet all day, while you lie in bed till eleven, that you may have strength to open your letters when you come down to breakfast.'

Diana and Hercules looked at each other: the look said, 'How dare this fellow take such liberties?' and said it quite as plainly as the type in which the words are now printed. Indignation worked upon the two in opposite ways. Hercules sat speechless, but Diana suddenly found her tongue.

'It is fortunate that Tite is not in the room,' she said angrily, glancing over her shoulder as she spoke.

Silence ensued upon this, for Death began to feel ashamed of himself for having fallen into so light a tone when his father

was dangerously ill, and the others would not open their lips. When dinner was ended, Diana turned to her eldest brother, saying snappishly, 'I suppose you want to see your father to-night?'

'Oh, certainly,' cried Death. 'If only for a minute or two, let me see him.'

'I shall ask him how he feels,' she replied, and left the room.

The instant she entered her father's room a change passed over her. There was a softness in her movements, and a gentleness in her voice, which might have seemed incredible to anyone who had seen her behaviour at the dinner-table a little while before. A shaded lamp stood on a table beside the great easy chair in which her father was still sitting, and while his face was in partial darkness the light fell broad and strong upon his hands, and a diamond ring on one finger shone and

sparkled; but even the diamond scarcely shone so brightly as the eyes of the dying man, which in the gloom seemed to have a spectral light of their own. He heard her soft footstep, and brought his head round slowly and painfully to the side where she stood. He did not speak, but his look was full of consciousness and thought. 'How are you now, dear?' she asked gently.

He gazed on at her, and his eyes grew brighter still in their unearthly way, as he collected himself to speak.

'I am—better,' he said, with gasping pauses between each word. 'Better. That is—nearer the end.'

Diana drew herself up until her face was out of his sight, and then remained for a moment fixed like a statue. But the anguish she tried to repress would have its way, and she sank down at her father's side, and

covered her face with her hands, while the dying man, whose sternness had melted away like his daughter's, put out one hand feebly, trying to touch her head, but he could not.

'It is the way of all flesh, Diana,' he said. 'So it has been since the world began, and so it will be with thousands that love each other as truly as you and I. And does it matter much? We take our leave, and I go to my rest. You weep for me. But just think, Diana, how dry are the eyes which wept a thousand years ago—as bitterly as you do now. All will be over soon with all of us. The great consoler is a little nearer to me than to you, but he will be with you soon.'

She crept closer to him, and taking his hand in her own, laid her face against it softly, and so sat and wept, but said not a word; and he, exhausted by the effort he had

just made, spoke no more. Then Diana quietly put his hand back, and rose to her feet, relieved by her outburst of grief, and more like her usual self.

'Death has come to see you,' she said.

'Come, has he?' answered the sick man. 'I don't want to see him.'

'Not to-night in any case?' said Diana, half inquiring.

'Certainly not.'

She walked to the door, and touched a little bell, which rang with a low soft chime. The sound reached Deb Hathway's heedful ears, and she came out of the small chamber where she took her short snatches of repose.

'Deb,' said Miss Bolton in a whisper, 'go down stairs, and bid Tite tell Mr. Death that he cannot come up to-night. Say that it is an unreasonable hour. Then go and

have some sleep. I will sit with my father, and watch, for an hour or two.'

Deb went down, and Diana stole back to her father's side, seating herself on the floor, and resting her head upon the side of his chair.

'I have come to spend the first half of the night with you, dear,' she said, caressing his hand softly.

'But you ought to take rest, little Di,' replied the father, returning her caress.

'I am taking rest,' she answered. 'There is more rest for me when watching at your side than if I were trying to sleep in my own room. Besides, I can have a nice little nap here.'

She kissed his hand several times, and could feel him press it faintly back against her lips. Then she laid her head down again, and closed her eyes, her father closing

his as well; and so they remained for a long time without speaking. Diana wished him to think she was asleep, and he could not see the tear that broke from her closed eyelids, and ran down her cheek, telling of the vigilant sorrow that was at work behind her composed features. The fire sank low, and the room darkened, and still they did not speak, for each hoped that the other was sleeping. Suddenly a flame sprang up in the decaying fire, and lit the room, and the faces of father and daughter, with a cheery dancing light. Diana opened her eyes, and looked up.

'What a pleasant fire all of a sudden!' she cried.

The blaze tossed about, and played here and there among the smouldering embers which surrounded it, like the grey crumbling walls of some old ruin, and as it flamed away brightly lights and shadows glanced and darted over the ceiling and floor.

'Papa,' said Diana, after they had watched it for some time.

'What is it, Di?'

'I have been thinking that you may recover suddenly, just like that fire, and live on a long time to be the brightness of my life.'

'Do you think so?' he replied very feebly.

And as he uttered the feeble words the bright little flame all at once sank away, and they were left in darkness.

CHAPTER V.

FAMILY LOVE.

THE sunshine of a frosty March morning, which streamed into the comfortable breakfast room, seemed to be a good ally of the fire burning in the grate, for the outside air felt wintry, and the sunlight, dazzling to look at, had no heat in it.

Everything in the room, carpet, furniture, pictures, and the snowy table covered with china and silver, told of wealth and ease; and outside the prospect had charms of its own, for the trees glittered in the sun, and the farther landscape, looming through a shining

mist, offered such a view as few English cities can unfold before their inhabitants. Mr. Bolton's house was built in a choice situation, and caught a charming variety of views, and a stranger might have envied the fortunate possessor of such a mansion, unless, perchance, he had peeped into one particular room, and seen him there, sobbing and gasping his life away.

Into the bright sunny breakfast room Diana Bolton had entered twice that morning, but seeing no one she went out again, with an impatient exclamation. Neither of her brothers were down yet, though it was nearly ten o'clock; while she, who had been sitting up more than half the night, was in the middle of her morning's work. Just as the clock struck Death appeared, followed about ten minutes later by Hercules, and both the brothers secretly congratulated themselves

on having arrived before the inexorable Diana—an agreeable delusion which she took pretty good care to disperse when she joined them. The three sat down to breakfast, looking as uncomfortable and ill-assorted a party as one could imagine, for Death appeared ill at ease, Hercules was preoccupied, and Diana seemed in a savage temper. The elder brother, who was a religious man, and thought proper to say grace at every meal, clasped his hands and repeated one of the common forms reverently, during which Diana took particular care to pour out the tea, while Hercules yawned aloud, glancing at his sister to see if this bit of irreverence would at all appease her. Hercules had his own reasons for wishing to be on good terms with Diana that day.

'How is he this morning?' asked Death, speaking to his sister.

'No better,' she replied snappishly.

'Had he a good night?'

'He had not a good night.'

Death felt the force of Diana's manner, and asked no more questions. Hercules showed no interest in the subject, and ate his breakfast with his ordinary appetite, which was, indeed, no ordinary appetite. When he had nearly finished his meal, he looked up and said to his brother—

Have you come over here to wait it out?'

'Wait out what? My—our father's illness?' asked Death.

Hercules, too much occupied for speech, nodded.

'I suppose so,' replied Death gravely.

'Because you know it may go on long enough yet,' continued the other, leaning back in his chair lazily. 'A month—six

weeks—any time. What do you think, Diana?'

'Everything is uncertain,' she answered.

'Still I believe he will linger on for a long period,' said Hercules, persisting in his assertion for his own ends. 'I have quite decided to speak of his state as critical, but not immediately dangerous; and accordingly I shall make no change in my habits. When I am asked into society I shall go, just as if our father were in health. We are not to have two mournings—before his death and after.'

'I suppose you have some invitations which you do not wish to decline,' remarked Death.

'Well,' said Hercules, affecting indifference, 'Penruddocke asked me to dine with him this evening.'

'Who?' Miss Bolton inquired sharply. She had heard the name clearly enough.

'Penruddocke,' replied Hercules, trying to seem uninterested and indifferent, but failing signally.

'And are you going to dine with the Penruddockes to-day?' demanded Diana in a voice that made her brother quail.

'So I intend,' he answered. 'In fact, I have written to say I hope to be with them, if my father's state permits me to leave home.'

Diana looked at her brother as few except herself could look, and she had the satisfaction of seeing him change colour, and show every sign of extreme uneasiness. Now it so happened that Death, who was not the most observing of men, did not notice this exchange of glances between his brother and sister; and without any malicious intention, he made a remark which, at that particular moment, was more exasperating to

Hercules than the most insulting sarcasm could have been.

'I hear your name mentioned in rather close connection with Madeline Penruddocke,' he said. 'In fact, when I denied that there was anything but friendship between you, I was rallied for keeping your secret so well. I was told that everyone in Warcaster looked on your engagement as accomplished.'

'What do you say *now*, Hercules?' demanded Diana emphatically.

'People will talk, you know,' he answered, covered with confusion. 'Can I help old maids' gossip, or am I to regulate my conduct by it? A pretty state of things indeed!'

'There is no truth in the report, then?' said Death, still ignorant of the fires his words had kindled.

'Truth!' ejaculated Diana, before Her-

cules could speak. 'Madeline Penruddocke —why, Hercules, if you married that woman I should—I should——' she broke off suddenly. 'But there is no fear,' she added, laying her clenched hand on the table, and mastering her excitement. 'No fear.'

'Then I can say that Hercules himself contradicts the report,' said Death, now beginning to perceive that he had raised a disagreeable question, and wishing to get rid of it.

'Say that *I* contradict it,' cried Diana, in another outburst of fury. 'And let Hercules contradict *me* if I am wrong.'

She waited for a moment, looking at him, and in that way defying him to speak; and when she had satisfied herself that he was afraid to correct her, she rose from her chair, and stalked out of the room, her heavy eyebrows frowning down over a face

whose every feature expressed rage and determination. Death looked on in speechless wonder.

'What made you mention that report?' asked Hercules, turning on his brother angrily when the door closed. 'What business is it of yours?'

'I see I have made an awkward mistake,' replied Death mildly. 'I am very sorry, but just ask yourself how could I have foreseen it. Even now I do not understand why Diana is so vexed.'

'She has chosen a wife for me,' said Hercules, 'and, what is worse, she has convinced our father that her choice is wise.'

'The lady is not your choice, then,' said Death. 'Who is she?'

'Do you remember Harriet Strawbridge?' asked Hercules, with a serious and disturbed face.

'Harriet Strawbridge!' repeated Death, and he said nothing more, for the name so tickled his fancy that he burst into a laugh, while Hercules looked at him half in vexation, but half in approval too, for the laugh was a testimony to the absurdity of the scheme.

'Don't ask me to marry you—that's all,' cried Death, laughing on.

'It is preposterous, is it not?' said the other, speaking to his brother with unusual freedom and friendliness.

Before Death could reply the door opened, and Tite walked in:

'You are to go upstairs, Mr. Death,' he said, 'immediately.'

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND SON.

NIGHT and day the sick man sat in his chair. His disease was heart complaint, complicated with other disorders, and he could not lie down, even for an hour, without putting his life in danger, or greatly increasing his sufferings. So he sat in the one position always, propped up on each side, and wrapped and muffled until nothing could be seen of him except his nose, and the eyes, which watched everything that passed with a steady intense look, like that of a captive eagle.

A peculiar odour filled the room when Death entered. His father was now reduced

to a species of pharmaceutical dram-drinking, having to support himself with incessant glasses of ether or other powerful mixtures; and just now, in expectation of the coming interview, he had fortified himself with a dose of particular strength. He fixed his eyes upon his son, but made no sign of recognition; and when Death took his hand he did not return his warm pressure in any way. Death was used to coldness from his father, but this stony indifference, at such a time, shocked him, and for a while he could not speak.

'I have come to see you,' he said at last, nervously.

'Because you know I am dying,' replied the father, never lifting his eyes from his son's face.

'You are very ill,' said Death, 'but not dying, I hope.'

'What do you want with me now?' asked the sick man, without showing the smallest feeling of any kind.

'Nothing—nothing in particular,' answered Death, who seemed to find it hard to restrain his tears. 'I thought you might like to see me.'

'I have seen you, then,' said the father, with a bitterness in his voice, which even extreme weakness did not conceal. 'I am quite satisfied.'

'Have you nothing to say to me?' inquired Death, stooping over him a little.

Bolton made a sudden movement, as if he would rise, and gazed bitterly at his son as he answered:

'I had something to say—I hoped to say it, but I cannot speak. Go—you have seen me—go.'

'Father,' cried Death, dropping on his

knees, and seizing his father's hand, 'do I deserve this?'

The sick man began to gasp for breath, and tried to speak, but his lips moved uselessly, while with a strange mixture of feebleness and rage he motioned with his hand towards the door.

'You will kill him!' cried Diana, stepping forward. 'Do as he bids you. Do you want to kill your father outright, Death? she added, when he still lingered.

'It is cruel—it is wicked,' said Death, wildly. 'Diana—father—what does this mean?'

He looked at his sister, but her eyes flashed fire, and when he turned to his father he saw the thin lips moving on in voiceless upbraiding, while the quivering hand still pointed to the door.

'Leave the room!' cried Diana, grasping

his arm. 'I must interfere. You shall not stay another instant.' And as she spoke she pushed her brother away.

Death made no resistance, and she, holding his arm, led him to the door, and before he knew it he was thrust out, and he heard the key turned in the lock with a sharp click, which told him not to hope for re-admittance.

Diana flew to her father's side, and pouring out a fresh glassful of his cordial held it to his mouth. He swallowed it with great difficulty, and sinking back, gasped and panted for several minutes in a way which certainly showed that his daughter's fears for his life were not unfounded. But after all this he grew composed again, and spoke more firmly than before. 'Gone—is he?' he asked, giving a long sigh, as if a load had been removed from his breast.

'Yes,' replied Diana, with a short snarling triumphant kind of laugh. 'He is gone. And the door is locked behind him.'

'Then I shall never see him again,' said her father. 'Let me forget that I ever saw him at all.'

Diana thought it better to keep him perfectly quiet after his excitement, and went to the other end of the room, affecting to be occupied there. Presently she heard her father call her, and upon coming back saw that he looked very pale.

'Bend your head and listen to me—listen carefully—don't lose one word,' he said laboriously.

She put her arm round him, and bowed her head close to his mouth.

'When I am dead,' he continued, 'you will find yourself in a position that will surprise you—and surprise Hercules too.

You will have a great deal under your control. Diana, you are to make me a promise.'

'Anything you ask,' she replied.

'You are never to give Death one pound —one shilling. You are never to help or succour him in any way.'

'I never will,' answered Diana solemnly.

'Not if he were starving at your door,' continued her father.

'Not if he were starving at my door,' she repeated.

'That is enough,' he said. 'My mind is easy now. I have said everything. I have only to die.'

He put his head against her shoulder, resting it there, and she stroked his white hair with her hand, and kissed it softly. So they remained for a long time—indeed, this was his favourite posture—and he gently

dropped asleep. His daughter watched him while he slept, listening to every breath and marking the smallest change of his features with unmistakeable solicitude and tenderness. At one time a very sweet expression stole over his features, as if he were dreaming of something that pleased and softened him, but after about a quarter of an hour he opened his eyes, and Diana saw a look there the like of which she had never seen before, either in him or in any living being—a look full of pain and supplication.

'Father—dearest,' she cried, clasping him more closely, 'are you worse? Can you speak?'

He motioned faintly with his hand—the old motion which she well knew: he wanted to say something.

'Tell me—whisper to me—I can hear the lowest breath,' she said, speaking in his ear.

He turned about a little way—scarcely an inch—in the direction of the door, and beckoned with his finger.

'Can he want *him*?' said Diana to herself. 'Do you want to see Death again?' she cried aloud.

His eyes rolled up to hers, bright, and clear, and painfully intense in their expression of some feeling which tried hard to utter itself; and looking at her steadfastly he seemed to gather his whole strength together, and gave one nod of his head in reply.

She let him go gently, and opening the door called Deb Hathway. It was an arrow in her heart that her father should wish to see his eldest son again, especially at a time like this, but if he had asked her to die for him she would have complied without a murmur.

'Go down stairs, Hathway,' she cried,

'quick! Tell Mr. Death his father wishes to speak with him.'

'The Lord have mercy on us!' exclaimed Deb, not looking at Miss Bolton at all, but across the room to the sick man's chair. 'He will never speak to anyone again.'

And Diana, turning round, saw her father's head lying lifelessly on his breast.

CHAPTER VII.

'I GIVE AND BEQUEATH.'

THE funeral was dreary, even for a funeral. A heavy penetrating rain fell incessantly; the cemetery chapel struck coldly on the shivering mourners as they entered it; the service consisted of a series of nasal antiphones, droned to and fro between parson and clerk, for Hercules would not join in it, and the elder son, troubled with certain thoughts about the dead, felt the language of faith and resignation stick in his throat when he tried to utter it. The clergyman and his subordinate hurried from the grave-side to the vestry under one umbrella, as soon as

the last words were spoken; the two sons looked once at the coffin, lying far below, and walked silently to their coach; the rain drizzled on doggedly; and so Robert Bolton was laid to rest.

Since her father's death, Diana had not been seen even by her brothers, and they were surprised upon their return to find her seated in the dining-room, in company with the family lawyer.

'When business has to be done,' she said, calmly interpreting her younger brother's look of wonder, 'feeling must be set aside. Mr. Platt has no doubt explained to you that my father's particular wish was, that not the smallest hint of the nature of his will should escape until after his funeral.'

'I know that without explanation,' cried Hercules, with ominous rudeness.

'I am glad to hear it,' continued the

sister. 'One word more, and then I shall ask Mr. Platt to read the will to us. Of the contents of it—so far as particulars go—I know nothing. As to its general scope, my father let fall something a few minutes before he died, which leads me to think that it leans strongly in my favour. It may be well for me—in anticipation of any possible disappointment on your parts—to say that, excepting the hint I speak of, I am as ignorant of this will as either of you.'

'On that subject I shall form my own opinion,' said Hercules.

'Allow me to say,' added Diana severely, 'that I have not made this statement because I treat you as having any authority to judge in the matter. I wish to prevent misunderstanding. Whatever my father has done I shall accept, because I ought, and you will accept it, because you

must. I think we are quite ready now, Mr. Platt.'

Mr. Platt, who had prudently plunged into his papers when this little prologue commenced, now opened the will, and began to read it with the air of a man who is in a position which enables him to be cool and collected while he is agitating the feelings of others. The document was long and wordy, of course, but not very intelligible, and Hercules, after listening to every syllable of it with undivided attention, found himself at the close unable to understand his own position. That portion which concerned Death was plain enough. He was to receive a legacy of ten pounds—to be paid immediately, if he required it, for such was the malicious instruction which followed the bequest.

When this cruel announcement was made Death turned pale, and rising from his seat

walked to the window. He had great self-control, and for a moment tried to rally his spirits by assuring himself that this blow would not crush him altogether. But the facts of his life were too palpable for even that momentary illusion, and he saw, and confessed in his own thoughts, that the words he had just heard marked him out for ruin. Perhaps, if the stroke had been lighter, he might have showed more outward agitation. But he was not disturbed by any conflict of hope and fear. Despair possessed him wholly, and he returned to the table with a composed manner which surprised himself.

Meanwhile one or two questions had disclosed to Hercules the substance of that portion of the will which concerned him. He was left, in various forms, property amounting to ten thousand pounds.

'Are you sure that is the total value?' he inquired, with a rapidly falling face.

'Quite sure,' the lawyer answered. 'Your late father went over the several items with me, and such was the sum he assigned to you.'

'But my father was worth a hundred thousand pounds, if he was worth ten,' cried Hercules.

'Your late father was worth, as nearly as possible, eighty thousand pounds,' said Mr. Platt, confidently.

'Let it be eighty thousand then,' roared Hercules. 'Am I, his son, to have only ten out of it?'

'Remember the legacy your eldest brother has received, sir,' replied the lawyer. 'A legacy, let me say, which I wrote most unwillingly, and not without a warm protest.'

'Be so good, Mr. Platt,' remarked Diana haughtily, 'as to confine yourself to the business before us. My brother Hercules does not perceive in what manner the remainder of the property is appropriated. Will you explain the matter to him?'

'The remainder is left to his daughter Diana,' said Mr. Platt, looking into the will as he spoke. 'Every penny—absolutely.'

'To Diana!' repeated Hercules, turning upon his sister. 'How have you poisoned my father's mind against me?'

'Now, now, now!' cried the lawyer, raising both hands, 'let me explain the reasons which led your late father to adopt this course towards you. He expressly laid the whole matter before me, and, still more, he desired me to detail the particulars to you after his decease. Shall I enter into the matter now, or explain it to you in private?'

'Say anything you have to say,' replied Hercules sulkily.

'Your father,' continued Mr. Platt, 'was led to believe that you had some intention of asking Miss Penruddocke to be your wife. Indeed, he suspected that you had already asked her privately, and had been accepted by her. He conceived a great aversion to that young lady—I must say without any reasonable cause that I can conjecture.'

'Mr. Platt,' said Diana again, 'it will be convenient if you confine yourself to facts. I am not aware that your conjectures can throw much light on my father's estimate of his acquaintances.'

'As you please,' answered the lawyer civilly, for he was not going to quarrel with a rich client. 'In any case, sir, your late father's words to me were—"As Miss Penruddocke is fond of my son, she may keep

him with her money, but he certainly shall not keep her with mine."'

'I understand—I understand,' cried Hercules; 'I know by whose persuasion and misrepresentation all this has been brought about. We shall see, however. Wills have been upset before now by proving undue influence.'

'There has been no undue influence in this case,' said Mr. Platt, shaking his head, and smiling quietly.

'Hercules,' said Diana sternly, 'I shall not answer your insinuations; you are excited, and I make allowance for you; but let me tell you that the only person who has used undue influence in the matter is yourself. You have been self-willed, and weak, and not particularly candid.'

'I shall marry Miss Penruddocke in spite of you,' cried he.

'I doubt that, Hercules,' she replied, 'you will think better of it; or if you do not, she will.'

At this point Death looked up. He had not been listening to the previous conversation; indeed, a far angrier dispute would have failed to arouse him, absorbed as he was with his own affairs. He had become very pale, and his voice was low and uneven. 'Why has my father treated me so?' he asked, addressing the lawyer. Diana made a gesture of impatience.

'You must be aware,' said Mr. Platt, speaking gently, for he saw that Death bore his misfortune with dignity, 'that your late father never loved you as a father ought to love a son.'

'Really, Mr. Platt——' Diana began.

'Quite right,' said the lawyer, making a little apologetic bow to her, 'I am, perhaps,

going too far. The painful circumstances connected with your birth——'

'And your lifelong disregard of your father's wishes,' cried Diana, breaking fiercely into the dialogue. 'Your opinions—your views of life—your choice of a profession—everything about you—were repugnant to him. He treated you as any just father would treat a son who outraged his wishes—he left you to feed on the husks you have chosen. You, I suppose, expected the fatted calf, and the best robe!'

'See here, Diana,' said Hercules, roused by his own wrongs into a hasty sympathy with his brother. 'You go beyond all bounds. Death must find his position painful enough without your violence. I won't have any more of this—upon my soul I won't!'

'You won't!' retorted Diana, rising and stamping her foot. 'Pray what have you to

say in the way of will or won't in this house? Do you remember that you are under my roof now? Sympathise with Death elsewhere, if you please—divide your portion with him, if you feel he has been hardly used. In this house I am mistress, and I tell you now, that not another syllable on the subject of my father's will shall be spoken in my presence.'

Mr. Platt, who was again busy with his papers, elevated his eyebrows in a kind of acted soliloquy upon this clinching speech. Death looked too heart-broken for disgust; Hercules stood gazing on his sister in dumb amazement; and she walked across the room with a martial step, and pulled the bell so furiously that the house rang with a hundred noisy peals.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RETROGRESSION.

MADELINE PENRUDDOCKE was a fine woman. It is true that any malicious rival might have picked her to pieces, feature by feature, for she was not a beauty in the Book of Beauty sense; but she was tall, well-shaped, and plump; her movements were full of energy, and not deficient in grace; she had a lively wit, easy, though perhaps rather masculine manners, and she was a mistress of the art of dress. In this last particular she possessed other resources besides good taste, for her fortune was ample, and she was never forced, like too many of her gentle sex, to decline a becoming dress with a sigh, when the price

came to be mentioned. Dress is no small part of a woman's charms, and women well know it, or they would despise finery as heartily as any male moralist. Fashion, too, may be absurd, but, somehow, a woman who is fashionably dressed always looks the better for it. Now to the attractions of a fairly agreeable person, Miss Penruddocke added the faculty of dressing herself so that, while she always had a style of her own, she always had the fashionable style too ; and in one way or another she managed to secure an amount of admiration which would have turned the head of a weak woman. Madeline was not weak. She liked admiration, but would not be intoxicated by it.

She was an orphan, and had lived for many years in the house of a bachelor uncle, a retired officer, who, being a person of kindly disposition, but of timid and pliable character,

had long ago suffered her to pass from under his guardianship, and, indeed, had allowed himself to pass under hers. Madeline ruled not only herself, but her uncle and his household. This came about, however, not because she was impatient of control, or imperious towards others, but simply by that kind of gravitation which settles the relative position of persons who are associated; without any struggle of the weak against the strong, if these latter will only be still, and let nature's laws fight for them. The uncle and niece had never quarrelled in their lives. As to managing Madeline, or trying to make her do one thing if she expressed any inclination to do another, he would as soon have thought of issuing orders to the Commander-in-Chief; and as their relative force of will was in proportions somewhat like to those existing between the physical strength of a

child of four years and that of a race-horse, he was in his submission wiser than he knew. It must be added that Madeline used her strength discreetly. She loved her uncle, and petted him beyond measure—as she might have petted a kitten, however, and with as little notion that he was in any sense her superior.

They entertained freely, and were of course entertained in return. Miss Penruddocke acquired, at an unusually early age, that ease and urbanity which are produced by intercourse with society, when the pupil, far from being troubled by any suspicion of inferiority, is consciously on an equality with all comers. In her provincial way she was a queen of society, and as she had a fair share of good nature, and an uncommon supply of good sense, she maintained her position with dignity, and became a capital hostess and the

liveliest of guests. In her own drawing-room she contrived to make her friends shine, and in the drawing-rooms of her friends she shone herself; and, in short, by sound judgment and knowledge of the ways of good society, she made herself more agreeable and useful than many women who far excelled her in talents and looks, and perhaps in virtues; for Madeline, though a very good young woman as life goes, was not a heroine, nor a prodigy of any sort. She had a certain amount of good feeling, which formed her character up to a particular point; common sense then carried the work forward; and when common sense began to fail, good breeding took up the structure and completed it. So we find houses, solidly built in the lower storeys, while the highest part—or garrets—are lightly fabricated, and in spite of that furnish very tolerable accommodation.

For some time Madeline Penruddocke and Diana Bolton had been enemies. Under no circumstances would they have liked each other, but a special complication of events was needed to beget and nourish the defined ill-will which they felt each for each. To say which was more in fault would not be easy; but without any doubt Madeline fired the first shot. Diana's bookish talk, and her ungainly manners—which were ungracious as well as ungainly—repelled and annoyed a young woman who excelled in the feminine arts of accomplishments, dress, and carriage; and who lived to give pleasure and to be pleased, without any idea of being learned, or of analysing the nature of things. On a particular occasion, and in the presence of a large company, Miss Penruddocke so far forgot herself as to let slip a sarcasm upon Miss Bolton's taste in dress, which she maliciously

pointed by adding a compliment upon her learning and mental depth. This ill-natured speech was carefully reported to Diana by one who heard it uttered. Diana's indignation was unbounded. She adopted the unhealthy plan of bottling up her rage, and as a considerable time passed before she had an opportunity of retaliating, her resentment became violent indeed. At last the hour for revenge came—or rather, Diana thought so. She met her enemy in company one evening, and Miss Penruddocke, who was an accomplished musician, took part in a vivacious argument upon the education of women, defending the common prejudice which recommends them to aim at excellence chiefly in music, painting, and such delicate arts. Diana Bolton said nothing, but looked thundery, especially when Madeline brought the laughter to her side by a lively sally of

wit. Soon, however, a guest, who was contending in the opposite cause, uttered a satirical sentiment, which Miss Penruddocke declared he had borrowed from Rochefoucauld; and at this point Miss Bolton, interposing with a bitterness which surprised everybody, declared that the words in question were to be found in Shaftesbury's '*Characteristics*.' She added, with outrageous rudeness, that a person so ill-informed as to confound the two authors would do well to be silent when education, in any form, was being discussed. Everybody looked amazed, and a painful silence followed. Miss Penruddocke, who was no wide reader, had in all probability never heard of Shaftesbury in her life; but it so happened that in this case she was sure of her fact, having, indeed, met the quotation that very morning. So on the spot she declared herself to be right,

and Miss Bolton replied, more contemptuously than before, that she was surely wrong, and turned scornfully away. The quarrel as it stood was, in Sir Lucius O'Trigger's phrase, a very pretty one, but one of those persons who never will let well alone, managed to hunt up in the library a copy of Rochefoucauld's maxims, and produced it publicly, convicting Diana Bolton of having made a mistake. To her nothing could have been more mortifying. In a literary dispute, which she herself had provoked, she was worsted by one who did not pretend to literature, and whom she personally disliked. She apologised to Miss Penruddocke with her lips, and hated her for ever after.

That same evening Hercules Bolton, looking at the brilliant Madeline, and mindful of her fortune, thought to himself what a very fine wife she would make. She quickly per-

ceived his admiration ; and partly to show that she did not identify him with his sister, but more because he was good-looking, and she liked a bit of flirtation, she encouraged his advances. As, however, she had no serious thoughts of letting the affair go farther, she cooled a little before they parted ; and when Hercules ventured, in saying 'Good-bye,' to press her hand with that particular squeeze which lovers understand, she let her palm and fingers slip through his lifelessly. The next morning in her sprightly way she asked her uncle, as they sat at breakfast, what he thought of Hercules Bolton, and with much laughter, but not a sign of a blush, declared that he was in love with her.

'What do you say to that?' she asked gaily.

'What do you say to it, my dear?' replied Colonel Penruddocke, who looked par-

ticularly limp, and drooped over his breakfast like a willow.

'I want your advice,' cried Madeline, laughing more heartily than before.

'If you want that you shall have it,' said the Colonel gravely, for he never joked himself, and never saw other people's jokes. 'If you really like the young man, I dare say there will be nothing against him.'

'But suppose I do not like him, uncle?' she remarked.

'If you don't like him, my dear,' he replied, 'in all probability there *will* be something against him. In fact, my dear, there is something against every young man.'

Nothing more was said on the subject, and, had it not been for Diana herself, the love-affair would have ended with the innocent encounter of that one night. But from some unguarded remark which Hercules

let fall, his sister began to suspect that he admired Madeline Penruddocke. At the bare notion of her enemy becoming her brother's wife, Diana's wrath rose to a dangerous pitch, though for a time she retained sufficient power over herself to refrain from any expression of feeling. A few days later, however, she unexpectedly came upon her brother in the street, and found him engaged in a lively chat with the dashing Madeline. A sudden rush of vexation swept every consideration of prudence from her mind, and as to the restraints of good-breeding Diana never shrank from casting these aside when so inclined. She flew up to her brother, and addressed him so angrily that for the moment she reduced him to an almost mesmeric state of passivity; and before he recovered his senses, she walked him away at her side, his head hanging down, as if he

were a truant schoolboy returning to the rod. She darted a vindictive look at Miss Penruddocke, but took care not to salute her, and the discomfited Hercules could only gasp an awkward 'Good-bye' as he was carried away captive.

Diana had won a victory, but it was one of those victories which are more fatal than defeats. Had she that afternoon left Madeline in undisturbed possession of Hercules, the heiress would never have thought seriously of marrying him. But women—and men too—are every day taking steps in life from pure rivalry and contradiction, which they would never take from inclination. Madeline Penruddocke brushed off her indignant surprise, and, tossing her head scornfully, went her way. But in her heart she resolved to do, out of dislike for Diana, and to triumph over her insolent opposition, what out of regard

for Hercules she would never have done. Perhaps she was not aware that she had gone so far, even in her thoughts. But the balance had turned. The prize was for Hercules from that hour, whenever it suited him to claim it.

CHAPTER IX.

A RETROGRESSION—*continued.*

DIANA watched her brother closely. As time went by evidence accumulated, and she soon felt convinced that Hercules still harboured the design she dreaded. Where the affections are concerned every woman is a seer. Hercules fancied he kept his secret safely, while he was betraying himself, by words, looks, or other signs, a score of times each day. At this juncture the elder Bolton's health began to fail, and Diana, suspecting that her brother was waiting for his father's death to accomplish his purpose, determined

to out-manœuvre his sleepy plans. She consulted her father in her own abrupt and self-confident way.

'Hercules ought to get married,' she said, as they were driving out together one afternoon.

'Married!' exclaimed her father, greatly surprised, for Diana and he had opinions which were not favourable to the holy estate of matrimony. 'And why in the world should he do that?'

'Because he is not fit to choose a wife for himself,' replied Diana.

'I cannot see the reasoning,' remarked her father.

'Hercules ought to get married for this reason,' she repeated. 'If he marries now, you can take care that he shall marry wisely; but if he waits until he is his own master, he will make a fool of himself.'

'And who is he to marry?' the old man asked.

'Harriet Strawbridge,' replied Diana energetically.

Bolton senior looked at his daughter to see if she were serious; and reading in her face a very determined intention, he prudently restrained the smile that was rising to his lips. Even he stood in awe of his daughter's temper.

'Hercules and Harriet will make a good pair,' continued Diana calmly. 'Hercules is a noodle, and Harriet is a well-read woman.'

Her influence over her father was unbounded, and in the course of an hour's conversation she had persuaded him that, if Hercules married Miss Penruddocke, she—Diana—would be miserable for life. When this fact had been driven home, she aroused

her father's fears by declaring that all her recent observations led her to believe that Madeline had made a conquest of foolish, helpless Hercules. After this it was easy enough to prove that her choice of Harriet was sagacious, for Miss Strawbridge was wealthy; and, for reasons that will soon appear, she was likely to look with favour on any tolerable suitor. As Diana helped the old man out of the carriage, she felt that Hercules was in her power. The strong will of her father had been secured for her side, and what could her brother do but submit?

A less courageous person than Diana would have feared to choose Miss Strawbridge to compete with so brilliant a young lady as Madeline. Harriet Strawbridge was most decidedly not an attractive woman. Her age was thirty-seven, but time was not guilty of stealing her charms, for during ten years

her complexion and features had not changed in the slightest degree. She was preternaturally thin, and on the hottest summer day her hands were cold to the touch,—not cool, but cold, with the coldness of a corpse. She seldom smiled, and in all probability had never shed a human tear since her nursery days. So frigid she was and inaccessible—so remote from common life and passion—that, in spite of her fortune, she had never been asked in marriage; and, indeed, this was the first time that any of her friends thought of her in such a connection. She was severely clever; well-read, as Diana said; the aversion of most men, and the terror of male butterflies and blockheads, whose frivolities she would rebuke by a knife-like elevation of her thin upper lip, which was, indeed, her own particular smile. Altogether Harriet looked like the in-

habitant of some other world, and that a world where marrying was unknown.

But when Diana, without the smallest circumlocution, asked her friend if she would feel disposed to marry Hercules, Harriet laughed a kind of flattered laugh. She seemed to relish the notion, and her conversation became less bookish and more human on the spot. The pair of friends talked the matter over with great care, and it was not until they had almost exhausted the subject that Harriet, struck by a natural thought, inquired how Hercules had discovered his passion, and what he had said.

'He has never said anything,' replied the supreme Diana.

'Really, Diana!' exclaimed Miss Strawbridge, less surprised, however, than might have been expected. 'Perhaps he never will say anything.'

'I shall take care of that,' was the reply.

'Is it, then, your idea and not his?' cried Harriet.

'It is my idea,' answered Diana. 'Does that make any difference to you?'

'No,' replied Harriet, shaking her head, and speaking slowly as she weighed the matter. 'It makes no difference to me.'

The undaunted Diana now turned her guns upon Hercules himself. Without the slightest warning, and maintaining an air of equal determination and confidence, she announced to him that he must marry, and that soon. Hercules could scarcely believe his ears.

'Why must I marry?' he asked.

'Your father wishes it,' she replied.

'Indeed!' cried he uneasily. 'Pray has my father chosen a wife for me?' He meant in his clumsy way to be ironical, but never was irony more misplaced.

'Of course he has chosen a wife for you,' answered Diana, delighted to meet her brother on his own ground. 'It would be unreasonable of him to insist on your marrying, if he had not done so.'

'Well,' said Hercules, swallowing his surprise and vexation in one great gulp, 'I hope I shall like the lady.'

'I hope you will,' said Diana, fixing her eyes upon him in a menacing way. 'If not, it might be awkward.'

Hercules looked as if he would have liked to swear at his sister above all things, but he did not dare to exhibit any sign of feeling which might provoke her. Indeed, his heart beat with apprehension as he asked the next question :

'May I know my intended's name ?'

'Harriet Strawbridge,' answered his sister, in the most business-like manner.

The look of amazement and dismay that broke out on Hercules' face so struck Diana, and so quickened her sense of triumph, that she could scarcely keep her countenance. But levity was not her besetting sin, and she did not let the least symptom of her secret enjoyment come to the surface, but confronted her brother, rigid, unbending, and relentless.

'Confound you—*it*, I mean,' cried Hercules, beginning in anger, but sinking at once to remonstrance. 'Is there no other woman in England you could think of?'

'Harriet Strawbridge is your father's choice,' said Diana deliberately. 'Are you in love with anybody else?'

'I am not in love with her, and never shall be,' replied he.

'That is not of any particular importance,' said Diana coldly. 'Marrying her is your father's affair; loving her is your own.'

'But I might as well marry a fish—a frog—a stone,' cried Hercules, who was growing desperate.

'For anything I can see, nine marriages out of ten would be happier if one of the parties were a stone,' was the hopeless response.

'But everybody is not of your way of thinking,' said Hercules, who seemed to feel his sister's powerful will coiling round and round him with irresistible strength. 'Let me choose a wife for myself, and I shall marry when you please.'

'I dare say,' replied Diana, with a smile of intense acidity. 'I suppose your choice would fall on Miss Penruddocke?'

'And why not?' roared Hercules, emboldened by despair. 'She is flesh and blood at least. Harriet Strawbridge is a shadow —an apparition—a ghost. Oh, confound it,

Di, you can't be in earnest. Besides,' he added, catching at a new thought with a suddenly brightening face, 'she would not have me. She is a great deal too clever—too fastidious, you know—she never would marry me.'

'I have settled that point,' remarked the tormentor.

'You don't mean to say you have asked her to marry me!' cried Hercules, turning pale.

'Certainly I have,' replied Diana, 'and she says she will.'

For the second time she had to repress a smile, so blank, so terror-struck was her brother's face. But her business was to enforce obedience, and not to amuse herself; and she kept her features as stern and hard as flint.

'All those matters are settled,' she con-

tinued. 'Of course, as a matter of form, you must make your own proposal. But there is not any fear that the offer of your hand will be refused. Harriet is coming here to-morrow to spend the day. I shall leave her in the drawing-room by herself for half-an-hour, and give orders that no one is to be admitted. At that time you must go in to her, and say what has to be said. You need not be long about it. She will expect you, and I shall take care to tell her beforehand what is going to happen.'

Hercules looked at her, struggling between the spirit of rebellion and the spirit of fear.

'First of all, I am to marry whether I like it or not,' he said.

Diana bowed her head and tightened her lips.

'And next, I am to marry Harriet Strawbridge, whether I like her or not?'

'It is your father's will.'

'And if I refuse?' demanded he.

'The consequences of that I do not wish to foretell,' said Diana gravely. 'I suppose you know that Death is to be disinherited?'

'I have never heard so, but I fully expect it,' answered her brother. 'Why do you mention that just now?'

'You will be the eldest son.'

'Of course I shall,' cried Hercules, with a little of his stupid, supercilious air. 'For the life of me I cannot see what that has to do with Miss Strawbridge.'

'It has to do with your obedience to your father's will,' cried Diana, now looking upon him with eyes of fire. 'Either you marry Harriet, or—well, I had better say no more.'

'Say on,' exclaimed the other. 'Say on. Either I marry Miss Strawbridge or—what?'

'You shall be disinherited, like your brother Death.'

CHAPTER X.

A RETROGRESSION—*continued.*

HARRIET STRAWBRIDGE appeared the following day at the house of her friend, in smarter attire than she had ever worn before, her bonnet being, for her, a miracle of gaiety and colour. There was an exaltation in her manner, and even a tinge of blood suffused her yellow cheeks. In a word, the severely intellectual being, who until now frowned upon the affections, had, at the prospect of an offer, thawed into womanhood—ungainly womanhood, it is true, but still the most genuine possible with her. She was preoccupied, and during luncheon would scarcely

answer when spoken to; but now and then her eyes strayed to where Hercules sat, and as their glances met she affected confusion, and he seemed overwhelmed with dismay. Harriet thought that this was nervousness, and quite the proper thing; but Hercules felt that his sister's eyes were upon him, and between actual sensations of misery and attempts to seem unconcerned, the unhappy young man was brought to the border of insanity. Diana sat at the end of the table, saying very little, but expressing in her manner all that words could have said, and a great deal beside. Bolton senior, who seldom came down before dinner, had made a special point of appearing on this occasion; and though, like his daughter, he said but little, he addressed Harriet Strawbridge with a warmth and courtesy which convinced Hercules that Diana only spoke too truly

when she declared that her father desired the marriage.

When the two ladies rose to leave the table, old Mr. Bolton also stood up, and, having opened the door with unusual ceremony, followed them out of the room, and did not return. Hercules waited for a moment, expecting his father to reappear; but perceiving that he was to be left alone, he applied himself to the decanter as a preparation for the troubles which were in store for him. His solitude was soon disturbed by his sister, who turned the door-handle violently, and entered the room again, with the air of one who meant to strike terror by her very looks.

'Come, Hercules,' she said, 'Harriet is ready.'

He rose, and went after her. Perhaps the wine had reduced him to a state of stu-

pidity, for he did not speak a word, but ascended the stairs at her side in silence. Diana judged from his dumb obedience that her point was already as good as gained. Accordingly, when she threw the drawing-room door open, and discovered to Hercules the charming Harriet, who was seated in an easy chair, she looked more graciously at her brother, and said in a softened voice—

'I shall be engaged for half an hour: I leave Harriet in your care.'

And she withdrew, and shut the door. The next moment she reappeared, but only for a second, saying:

'Remember; half an hour.'

Upon which she closed the door emphatically, as if to signify that the happy pair would not again be disturbed.

Diana looked at her watch as she went down stairs, and saw that it was twenty

minutes to three. At ten minutes past that hour her fingers were upon the handle of the drawing-room door again, and without any warning she walked in upon her pair of lovers. A smile was on her face, but it vanished quickly, and she turned to Hercules with her blackest frown. One glance told her that her wishes had not been carried out.

Cross, soured, and flushed with vexation, Harriet Strawbridge sat on in the same chair, affecting to be engaged with a book, while Hercules, looking the picture of irresolution and discomfort, stood poring over a curiously carved ivory paper knife which he held in his hand. Harriet cast so reproachful a look at her friend, and Hercules was so obviously afraid to look at her at all, that Diana needed no speech to explain the state of affairs. The proposal had not been made, and she had been trifled with and humiliated, not only

in the presence, but in the service of her friend.

'Harriet,' she said in a terrible voice, 'I am afraid you have found my brother a poor companion. Come to my room.'

She wrenched the handle of the door as if it were a living thing which could feel her wrath; and when her friend had passed out, closed the door with a crash that made Hercules, and the room itself, tremble.

'What a tigress she is,' he muttered to himself, scarcely daring to look up at the door through which she had gone. 'Why can I not face her and conquer her? She is only a blustering woman after all. Any man can subdue a woman, if he tries.'

Hercules, however, did not try. Instead of opposing his sister openly, he endeavoured by stratagem to gain a little time, hoping that in the meanwhile the chapter of accidents—

in other words, his father's death—might deliver him out of her hands. He made the most abject apologies for his treatment of Harriet Strawbridge, and protested that, at some future day, he would ask her to marry him. This was the merest pretence, and Diana saw into its motive. Hercules was terrified lest she should use her almost unbounded influence with his father to carry into effect her threat of disinheritance; and marking the old man's daily failing health, he computed that he might deceive his sister, and quell her suspicions by clever excuses and procrastinations, promising one day to make Harriet his wife.

'And once my father is dead, and the property mine, we shall see which of us can bluster best—we shall see, Wolf!' said the refined and ingenuous young man, who revenged himself secretly on his sister by giving

her the names of the wildest and most savage beasts. 'I shall enjoy a scene with you when *my* turn comes.'

Diana was, of course, not deceived. The chances in favour of Hercules were few and slender. His mind was sleepy, dogged, and self-satisfied; and he was too profoundly possessed with a sense of his astuteness to distrust even the clumsiest pretexts that were of his own devising. He thought that the game was secure long after it had been hopelessly lost. Diana did not, in so many words, ask her father to disinherit Hercules; and she took care not to be directly informed that a will had been drawn up with a provision to that effect. When she assured her brothers and the lawyer that she was ignorant of the contents of the will, she spoke literal truth. But she knew, substantially, that neither Death nor Hercules would come

in for the bulk of the property, and she could guess the rest. In this way, then, the family history of the Boltons had advanced to the crisis when, after the reading of the will, Diana in her trenchant manner asserted her supremacy in the house which Hercules had already begun to call his own.

Death departed that afternoon. Hercules, whose selfish sympathy had evaporated, bid him a sulky farewell, and Diana refused to see him again. No sooner had he left the house than she sent an imperious message to Hercules, bidding him to come to her at once; and he, seeing that his hopes in life now to a great extent depended on her good-will, obeyed submissively. He even asked her pardon for the language he had used that morning. She, in her hard matter-of-fact way, observed that by-gones were by-gones, and that if he would behave

prudently in the future, she would forget the past. At the mention of this condition Hercules—perhaps involuntarily—frowned, upon which his sister frowned too—more severely than he.

'I am now mistress of seventy thousand pounds,' said she. 'My father's original intention was to leave me only thirty, and you were to have had the remainder.'

She paused, and Hercules bowed his head, humbly enough, as a sign of attention.

'I regulated my plans in life on the supposition that I was to have thirty thousand pounds under my control,' she continued. 'I require no more. Your father wished you to marry Harriet Strawbridge. Her fortune, as you know, is considerable. In addition to it you shall receive from me the day you marry her forty thousand pounds, and you—or your heirs—shall inherit my

property at my death. Now, Hercules, will you make her your wife?'

Never was a man so perplexed. He loved money, and he hated Harriet Strawbridge; he had a liking for Madeline Penruddocke, and he feared his sister. Here he stood, confronted by a question which he must answer, and it seemed ruin to say 'No,' and misery to say 'Yes.' For a moment he settled the matter by saying nothing. Diana saw his hesitation, and resolved to press her point.

'Yes or no: will you or will you not?' she said. 'I must have an answer before you leave the room.'

In sheer despair Hercules caught at her last words.

'Give me until this time to-morrow,' he cried. 'My mind is upset by all that has happened to-day. In twenty-four hours

I shall be more collected. Give me that time and—and—I have no doubt I shall do all you require.'

She looked hard at him, but for once failed to interpret his countenance, and she foolishly thought that he was safe, and in her power.

'I am satisfied,' she said. 'I shall expect your answer at this hour to-morrow.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE ORDER OF THE STORY IS RESUMED.

In his extremity, Hercules hit upon a way of escape. Up to the present time he had not been able to discover whether Madeline Penruddocke would marry him or not; and he was, from his peculiar position, unable to resolve his doubt by the old-fashioned and obvious method of asking her. Now, however, it occurred to him that he might win her by one bold movement. Why not ask her to marry him; show how much he had suffered for her sake; enlist his present difficulties into the service of his suit; flatter her vanity; throw himself upon her

loving-kindness; become prospective master of her fortune; and defy his sister? It was true, that by marrying Harriet Strawbridge he would secure altogether a much larger sum of money than Madeline, wealthy though she was, would bring with her. But Hercules, though not likely to play the fool for affection's sake, had sufficient humanity to prefer the ripe and womanly Madeline, with a handsome fortune, to the frozen and ghostly Harriet, on any terms that could have been expressed in figures.

Having to act rapidly, he acted wisely. He had not time to make a fool of himself. He wrote a short note to Madeline, in which, after a pathetic allusion to his late bereavement, he went on to say that a most extraordinary, and to him bewildering, occurrence forced him to ask her advice on a matter of the greatest importance to himself. If her

counsel was to be of any practical value he must have it at once. Could she see him at twelve the next morning? This little note was artful enough. By discreetly refraining from any allusion to the real purpose of his visit, Hercules averted the danger of a refusal, or a procrastination, which might have been as disastrous as a refusal. Madeline never suspected that he was going to propose to her. She believed that in some difficulty he was flying to her, for advice or assistance which his sister could not or would not give. The idea of defeating or supplanting Diana in any way was quite enough for Madeline: she penned a little letter, with an unguarded warmth of friendly expression, and said she would be delighted to see Mr. Bolton on any occasion whatever.

Hercules felt greatly elated upon receiving this auspicious reply, but as he lay

awake that night, preparing the morrow's elocution, a new difficulty rose upon his slowly-revolving mind. His habits were expensive, and odious as Harriet was to him, he confessed that he would prefer marrying her to facing comparative poverty, or even to running the risk of picking up a more agreeable woman with a competent fortune. Consequently Hercules was prepared, if Madeline refused to marry him, to return to his sister, and accept her terms and Harriet. All this was very prudent, but it did not look heroic; and Hercules wished to play the hero before his Madeline. Was he to tell her that he had rejected his sister's offer, and nobly flung her bribe at her feet? Nothing could be prettier or more effective, and the fact that the statement was untrue did not cause Hercules to hesitate about making it, because, he argued, as he turned uneasily from his right side to

his left, 'men must propose, and if they didn't tell lies they could not propose—at least, no woman would listen to them.'

In this way he reconciled the falsehood to his conscience, but immediately a new difficulty arose. How could he, after this declaration, press Madeline to give him an immediate reply? Suppose she were to promise an answer when she had consulted her friends, or in a week, or a month, what would his position be, with the grim Diana waiting for him at home, with her watch in her hand?

'And the worst of it is,' cried Hercules, giving his pillow an impatient tug, 'these women never *will* say yes at once—or very few of them. I dare say Harriet Strawbridge would answer one back quickly enough,' and he groaned.

The alternative to this heroic but unapt representation of his conduct was the ignoble

admission that, unless Madeline rescued him, he must marry Miss Strawbridge. To confess this, he felt, would never do.

'In fact,' said he, rolling round upon his right side again, 'I don't see how I am to put it. If I tell her the truth, I shall look like a fool; and if I don't, I may be made one.'

At last, however, Hercules settled upon a line of action which was truly sagacious. Dull as he was, he had noticed that Madeline and Diana hated each other. He resolved to relate at great length how Diana, suspecting the quarter towards which his affections pointed, had plotted his ruin. He would not mention the name of Miss Strawbridge, but simply say that his sister had offered him forty thousand pounds if he promised not to marry Madeline. This would make, without any doubt, a telling announcement. Then he would cast himself at the lady's feet, and

trusting to the excited state of her feelings, beseech her to reward his devotion by promising, on the spot, to marry him in due time. Hercules thought all this over a great many times, rehearsed it, decided that it would do, and at last fell asleep, and forgot his troubles and hopes until the next morning.

His plan succeeded. He was in effect appealing to Madeline's vanity, but he did not perceive this, and the most effective part of his scheme was the work of chance. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that fierce Diana, by her imprudent conduct, had made his undertaking easy. Diana had challenged Madeline to fight with her for the possession of Hercules, and Madeline was too fatally-spirited to maintain the indifference which would have been, under the circumstances, equally dignified and wise. So, from ridiculous vanity, this young woman, who

was quite as sensible as the majority of her sex, promised to marry a man whom she did not love, and who was in all respects her inferior.

The love-scene is no concern of ours. It was a heavy affair, and unworthy of the queenly Madeline. But so life runs away: good women marry sots; beauties cast themselves into the arms of blockheads; marriage, which might be and ought to be the sweet flower of life, growing out of the past, and having promise for the future, sinks in nine cases out of ten into an affair of selfishness or chance. Madeline, coming of a gentle and healthy family, and herself a pattern for brightness of mind and general vigour, ought to have married a strong, cultivated, and clever man, and she would probably have become the mother of stalwart and noble sons, who would have enriched the world. She chose

as a husband this empty, selfish noodle, and from that moment the glory of her life was gone.

Hercules returned to his sister's house excited and triumphant. He had not only won a victory, he had broken his chain as well, and henceforth the eyes beneath which he had quailed so often would no more make him afraid. He looked forward with a truly ignoble pleasure to his first defiance of Diana. He rubbed his hands together as he foresaw her anger and vexation, and kept his own indignation warm for the battle, by thinking of Harriet Strawbridge, and the monstrous marriage which had so nearly been forced upon him.

He took care to wait upon his sister at the appointed moment, for he knew her punctual habits; and he hugged himself as he reflected how she would interpret his

punctuality as signifying readiness to obey her. He was not mistaken: Diana raised her eyes as he came in, and smiled upon him graciously.

'I think I can read something in your face,' she said. 'You have decided upon marriage.'

'I have,' he answered.

Diana grew wonderfully bright.

'You are a good brother,' she cried, seizing his hand. 'I made a request that might well have seemed unreasonable, but I have your welfare in view. That I am not acting selfishly, my conduct shall show. From this day you stand in the position of eldest son, and the sum which would have been yours by inheritance if this marriage had taken place in your father's lifetime, I shall give you. I believe also that my father would have willed to you this house and its

contents : they are yours now, because you have obeyed him.'

Hercules began to feel that it would be difficult, after this handsome speech, to treat his sister in the rough way which he had intended. His resolution seemed to slip away, and he hesitated and reddened :

'You are most generous,' he said, 'but——'

'Hercules,' said Diana, in her self-possessed way, 'I am only just, nothing more. It is quite true that in law this property might be mine for ever, but according to your father's real wish it ought to be yours when you marry Harriet. So it shall be. And don't, I beg you, talk about my generosity : I have yet left more—far more—than I shall ever want.'

Hercules made a desperate effort.

'I am going to marry,' he said, 'but not Miss Strawbridge.'

'What do you mean?' cried Diana.

'I mean this,' replied Hercules, growing bolder, even before his confession had been made. 'It is unreasonable to expect me to marry Miss Strawbridge. I love Miss Penruddocke, and I have asked her to be my wife.'

'What was her answer?' inquired Diana.

'She promised to marry me.'

No words could describe Diana's state at that moment so well as those of Scripture: 'she was full of fury, and the form of her visage was changed.' In spite of her great power of will she was a woman of uncontrollable temper, and her fits of anger were terrible to witness. She turned white and trembling before she spoke, overpowered by the very approach of her passion, and Hercules himself cowered as he watched the onset of this gust of rage, which seemed

ready to carry Diana away, as a leaf is carried by the wind.

'Don't agitate yourself,' said he, with lips as white as hers.

'You have defied me, I see,' she cried, not even hearing what he said. 'You are going to take your own way in life. Understand then, that from this day I renounce you: you are my brother no longer. Madeline Penruddocke shall never take me by the hand; and as for you—poor self-satisfied numskull!—you shall not be shielded even for an hour from the punishment you deserve. I stand in your father's place, and I shall let it be publicly seen that you are a rebel and an alien. You leave this house at once. You shall not sleep here another night.'

'Consider, Diana,' pleaded Hercules, who had no longer any thought of striving with her. 'Don't lay all this bare before the

servants. Let us keep our quarrels to ourselves.'

'Once for all, then,' screamed she, confronting him with eyes that flamed, and stamping her foot on the floor again and again, as if nothing could utter the fury she felt, 'will you marry Harriet?'

'I cannot: I am bound,' replied Hercules in a tone that supplicated forbearance.

'You are not bound: you can free yourself. Wretch as that woman is she is too high-spirited to tie you down to a fool's promise such as you gave her. Will you marry Harriet—yes or no?'

'No,' cried Hercules, roused by her taunts. 'I should as soon marry a mummy. Have I said enough? Now listen,' he added, seeing her walk towards the bell-rope, 'consider our position in society. Don't expose yourself and me to the gossip of servants.'

A violent ringing of bells far below was all the answer he received, and in a moment Tite appeared, breathless with his race upstairs.

'Tite,' said the mistress of the house, in a loud, stern voice, 'I have ordered Mr. Bolton to leave my house at once. Whatever assistance he may require in packing up what belongs to him he must have. I am not particular about the hour he leaves, so long as he is gone before night.'

Tite, who did not as yet know the nature of his late master's will, or Diana's position in the house, looked at Hercules in amazement and incredulity. 'What!' cried Diana, furious at the sight of the man's hesitation, 'do you wish to leave the house too? If not, obey my orders. Hercules, you can command Tite's services for the rest of the day. Go, and let me see you no more.'

'One word you shall hear,' roared Hercules, who was now fully himself. 'You are a supplanter and a cheat. You have robbed me of my inheritance, and now you use your power in a way that is enough to make my father rise from his grave.'

'Don't take his name into your lips,' cried she, as if she really thought him profane.

'Why not?' he went on. 'His name is more mine than yours. Not take his name into my lips indeed! I shall do what I please, and I shall say the name was never disgraced until it was borne by his daughter.'

'Have you done? Go,' said she, grown calmer.

'Yes, I shall go,' replied Hercules, looking at the butler, as he prepared to fire his parting shot. 'Come, Tite, you will have a kind mistress and a happy home.'

As a first and last expression of liberty in that house, he closed the door upon his sister with a violence which she herself could not have exceeded, and which brought one or two flakes of plaster from the ceiling.

And so broke up the household of Robert Bolton.

CHAPTER XII.

DIANA IS OUTWITTED.

At the end of twelve months Madeline and Hercules were married. To the bride the wedding day was not bright, for during the period of courtship she had many opportunities of studying the character of her future husband; and she knew that there was little in him to admire, and less to love. Had she been a less honourable woman, she would have picked a quarrel, and broken off the engagement; but Hercules, in his dull, cunning way, foresaw that danger, and took care to remind her, almost every day, that he had sacrificed his worldly prosperity for

her sake. Besides, he kept his sulky temper in check, knowing that after marriage he would have abundant opportunities of being disagreeable without any damage to his prospects. He soon found out that Madeline did not love him, and he acted warily. He well knew that so long as he behaved himself properly, and maintained fairly the conventional exterior of an accepted lover, she would not retreat from her engagement, however ungracious it might become. It is one of the odd spectacles of this world to see knaves coolly calculating on a strict sense of honour in others, as the chief condition which shall secure the success of their schemes. Hercules did not think any the worse of himself because he relied on Madeline's honour as the safeguard of his own mean and selfish plans; and he so impressed her with the conviction that he was weak and

she strong, that, full of confidence in her power to rule over him, and in spite of the protests of her solicitors, she married without securing her large fortune by any deed of settlement.

Immediately upon their marriage they started for a long tour on the Continent. From the day when Diana drove Hercules out of the house, the brother and sister had not spoken, and would pass each other in the street without a sign of recognition. Madeline, growing quite disgusted with this odious behaviour, which Hercules secretly enjoyed, though he pretended to deplore it, suggested that they should go abroad, and travel for two or three years, until Diana's anger had subsided; and as her husband fell in with the proposal, they departed, and Diana neither saw nor heard anything more of them. She lived on by herself in the old

house, and was so little seen or noticed in the city, that her very existence came to be half-forgotten or unknown.

At last the gossips of Warcaster were reminded of her presence in their midst by an advertisement, which announced the sale of the mansion of the late Robert Bolton, Esquire, under the instructions of his daughter. Soon a story crept out that she was going to live in Florence, and had resolved to leave Warcaster for ever. For that nobody cared, but there were many guesses as to who the next tenants of the house would be. It was a stately mansion, fit for a duke, and having noble reception rooms, it was just the house for a wealthy man who liked to entertain his neighbours. A short time before the day of sale a second advertisement appeared, giving notice that the property had been sold by private con-

tract, and now indeed every tongue was busy, asking and wondering who the new-comer could be. At this time a strange rumour reached the ears of Miss Strawbridge, which so excited her interest that she (whose usual chit-chat consisted of the latest novelties in philosophy and the more astringent kinds of literature) flew to her friend Diana, and asked in breathless haste who it was that had bought the house.

'I have no idea,' replied Diana, with the utmost indifference. 'Mr. Platt told me that he himself did not know, as the business had been transacted through an agent, of whose respectability and competence he felt satisfied.'

'You have not heard the report then?' inquired Harriet.

'I hear no reports,' said Diana.

'Nor I, except now and then,' replied the

other. 'But this concerns you very nearly. I was told this morning, on good authority, that the name of the purchaser is Hercules Bolton.'

'What!' cried Diana, showing all her teeth in one great snarl.

'Your brother Hercules,' continued Harriet. 'He is the unknown purchaser.'

'He shall never set a foot in this house,' screamed Diana, jumping off her chair, and pacing the room wildly. 'I will cancel the sale.'

'Can you cancel it, my dear?' asked her cooler friend. 'I know something of these things.'

'I shall pay money—damages—anything,' exclaimed the furious Diana. 'In this house he shall never set his foot.'

'My dear, be calm,' reasoned Harriet, who was the grand-daughter of a lawyer, and

had a kind of inherited instinct in such matters. 'Are the title-deeds handed over?'

'They are; I believe they are,' cried Diana in despair.

'Then,' remarked Harriet, who bowed to fact in every case, 'you have no remedy. You must gulp down your vexation, my dear,' she added feelingly.

'No remedy!' said Diana, striking her clenched fist into her open palm. 'Then I shall set fire to the house, and burn it to the ground.'

'Would that be altogether prudent?' asked the less agitated friend, and Diana saw that she was talking wildly, and made no answer.

Harriet Strawbridge never made a mistake, and Diana soon discovered that her brother had secured the house beyond all possibility of dispute. To her this was an

unspeakable mortification. She had resolved —not without a pang—to let her father's home pass into the hands of strangers; but the idea of his son, who did not honour his memory or obey his will, living under that sacred roof was to her almost agonising. Strangers, not having known, could not desecrate those familiar rooms, but Diana fancied Hercules sitting in the dining-room where her father had so often presided, or sleeping in the room where he died, and she felt much the same horror that a pious Christian might feel at the idea of a revel being held over an altar. To such an extent had she carried her reverence for her father's memory, that before making arrangements for the sale of the house she had re-papered and painted every room, to efface as much as possible the associations which hallowed the place to her. Thus she had at last recon-

ciled herself to the picture of strangers in those venerated scenes, but they must be strangers indeed; and one of the motives which urged her to close with this particular purchaser was the belief that he had never heard her father's name. To discover Hercules under this mask, and to realise that he had secured the house beyond recall, was the sorest mortification she had ever felt.

It was irrevocable, and she prepared to submit as calmly as she could. The greater portion of the furniture had gone with the house, but she had reserved for herself the chair in which her father died. About an hour before the time fixed for her departure she went up to the room that had been his, and wheeling his chair over to the spot where he had breathed his last, she sat down to meditate; and then the heart of this

mysterious and implacable woman melted, and she cried like a child.

'Father, dearest father,' she murmured through her tears. 'Gone for ever! yet always at my side. Let the memory of your life be strength to me. Let me be as truthful, as impatient of all pretence, even the fairest, as you were. Live again in me, if it be only weakly, and for a little while, that I may carry on your work in this vain, hypocritical world. Truth, father, and nothing but truth for me, though I trample under foot the pious dreams of a deceived and self-deceiving race. Right, and nothing but right, though I blight what the weak and thoughtless call the human affections. Go with me, sacred image, from this house. Follow me, strengthen me, direct me. Though all who bear your name dishonour you, and the world laughs at your philosophy,

I shall love you, worship you, live according to your will, and die with your name upon my lips.'

She had passed into a kind of trance, when a knock at her door recalled her to common life.

'What is it?' she called out harshly, for the interruption irritated her.

She was told that a gentleman wished to speak with her upon urgent and private business, and being now herself again, she bid the servant say that she would come down immediately. Upon entering the half dismantled drawing-room she was met by a person whose face was strange to her, and whose address was homely and timid. The face was indeed a remarkably sweet one, but sweet faces did not greatly affect Miss Bolton, and she demanded with a frown what the visitor wanted.

'I come from your brother, ma'am,' he said, with an air of increasing diffidence.

'From Hercules Bolton?' cried Diana in a terrible voice.

'No, ma'am,' he answered, 'I come from the Reverend Death Bolton.'

'I don't know him,' said Diana abruptly.

'I am aware, ma'am,' continued the stranger, 'that an unhappy difference has arisen in your family. Pardon my alluding to that matter. Mr. Bolton knows nothing of my coming to you, but I feel that I am doing my duty. He is dying, ma'am.'

'Or thinks he is,' remarked the sister. 'Is there a doctor in attendance?'

'Certainly, ma'am, and has been this month past.'

'What do you want with me then?' asked Diana in the coldest of voices.

'I want you to visit him—to comfort him

—to nurse him—to be a sister to him,' cried the other, quite forgetting his respect in his excitement. 'Mrs. Bolton died a short time ago, and he is left alone, excepting the little new-born baby that is always at his side.'

'I heard of Mrs. Bolton's death,' said Diana, 'and I had also heard some rumour of the husband's illness. If I had thought proper to visit him I should have done so, without any suggestion from a stranger. 'By the way,' she added, looking sharply at her visitor, 'who are you, that you should interest yourself in the matter?'

'I am one of his churchwardens,' he replied. 'Excuse me, ma'am, he is a gentleman that everybody loves, and it is enough to melt a heart of stone to see him wasting away hour by hour, and his heart bleeding for the

baby that will soon be without any protector except the Lord,' he added, with unpretending piety.

Diana stood in silence a moment. 'A new-born baby?' she said, looking at the churchwarden with thoughtful eyes.

'Three months old, ma'am; the sweetest little girl you ever saw.'

'And the father—is he really dying?' inquired Diana.

'The doctor says he may live a month or two,' said the other, shaking his head. 'Recovery is impossible.'

'The father is anxious to find a protector for the infant, you said, did you not?' continued Diana, whose manner had quite changed.

'If he knew the baby would be cared for he would die in peace,' the honest churchwarden answered.

'Be it so, then,' said Diana. 'Your visit is well-timed. I shall be with Mr. Bolton to-morrow morning.' She turned away, and the visitor made a low bow and retired.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DEATH BOLTON.

THE parish of which Death Bolton was vicar lay in the heart of a midland town, and his house, a large and gloomy one, stood at the top of an unfrequented street. Diana arrived here about two o'clock in the afternoon, and on giving her name, she was shown into a large drawing-room, which presented a curious spectacle, for although the furniture was dusty and disordered, there were on every side abundant signs of taste and care. But the taste and care belonged to the past, and the dust and disorder to the present;

the room seemed the emblem of a decaying family.

Diana had no sooner seated herself, but an elderly housekeeper entered the room, and approaching her with an appearance of great deference, as if her character and name were well-known in the house, said that Mr. Bolton had just fallen asleep. Upon making inquiries Diana learned that her brother, who was fast sinking in consumption, had suffered for some weeks past from restlessness and sleeplessness, and would wander from room to room, now writing, now reading, now watching his new-born child, but never quiet for ten minutes together. He had spent all that morning at his desk, and a little while before had thrown himself upon his bed, where he now lay in a deep sleep. The doctor had just called, and left the strictest orders that his patient was not to be

disturbed, and that the most profound stillness was to be maintained through the house. Having detailed this information, the housekeeper, glancing round the disordered room, said that the library was more comfortable, as a fire was burning there; and added, that if the visitor would go to that room at her convenience, luncheon would be shortly served. All this Diana heard in her stony way, and when it was ended, she said that she wished to stay the night, and would like to be shown to her room.

In about half an hour she came down stairs, and asked for the library. She was told that Mr. Bolton still slept, and did not give the least symptom of waking; at which she coldly remarked that it was not surprising. She then walked into the library and sat down to her luncheon. During the meal she only spoke once. When the maid

who waited upon her asked if she would take some wine, she levelled one of her sourest glances at the young woman, and said with marked emphasis, 'Water—nothing but water.' For Diana knew her brother's weakness, and resolved to improve the occasion.

When she found herself alone, Diana began to look round the library, which was well furnished with books, and had an air of far greater comfort than the drawing-room. That Death was a man of wide and elegant reading was evident from his bookshelves. Theological and ecclesiastical literature were well represented, but still in that reasonable proportion to more general studies which would indicate a taste not kept within professional bounds. Perhaps, indeed, the long rows of dramatic authors which ran through shelf after shelf might have scandalised a purist; while as for Diana, who loved to

sneer at the narrow education of pious people, she noted these signs of breadth of reading with impatience. Philosophy had its particular shelf, and science also. But Diana observed that poetry was conspicuously absent. Not that she could find fault with this defect, for in her mind there was no such thing as a poet's corner.

As she thus wandered round the room, her eye fell upon a writing table, where lay a manuscript book which seemed to have been lately used. This book Diana took up and opened, listlessly at first, but as she turned over one or two leaves, her face grew more attentive. Soon she seated herself, and, going back to the beginning of the writing, commenced to read with an appearance of the utmost interest. The handwriting was her brother's, and when she perceived what the book contained she glanced over her

shoulder to assure herself that the door was shut, so that she could not be observed, and became instantly absorbed in the pages before her, which were nothing less than an autobiography written by her brother. The purpose of it Diana did not as yet perceive, but the subject was to her most interesting, and, running over the pages, she tried to calculate if she could get through it before her brother awoke.

The Autobiography of Death Bolton.

'It is not often that one in the prime of life, and in full possession of his faculties, sits down to record his experience of the world and man, knowing while he writes that his connection with both must, before many weeks, be dissolved. It is true, that persons under sentence of death, or persons who have determined to commit suicide,

stand in a position something like that which I describe; but my state cannot be compared with theirs. I leave the world, not under legal condemnation, nor in any misanthropic, life-hating frame of mind. My life has been in many ways a painful one, but it has been relieved with snatches of exquisite delight; and although my dearest affection lies in the grave, and calls me to follow, there is unfolding in this world a new love, which increases in power and sweetness every day. I am not afraid to die, and I could be well content to live. Die I must, however, for disease has already fixed my fate; and in this temper, and surrounded with such conditions, I am writing down my experience of human existence.

'Shall I not add another word? Dear daughter—little Susan, whose eyes, now closed in the sweet sleep of infancy, shall, as I hope,

at a distant day read these pages, not as a child, nor as a girl, but with the judgment and feeling of a woman—I write for you. You will never know a father's care or a mother's tenderness, but if your life lasts, and my plans for you are carried out—and I believe they will be carried out—you will some day know a little about the love which brought you into being, and which will surely watch over you from the invisible world—if that is permitted—and follow your steps onwards and onwards, until the veil drops, and your mother and father take you into their arms again.

'It is for you I write, little baby daughter, sleeping by my side; and no eye will read these lines until you—then grown into a woman—open this book, and learn a little about your father and mother, whose bodies so many years ago returned to dust. Think,

Susan—think, daughter—as you now read this page, that your life was the pledge and seal of the purest and most passionate love that ever bound two hearts together.

'Like you, darling, I never knew my mother, and with sorrow I add, like you, I never knew my father. He lived for others, but he never lived for me. The reason of this cruel alienation I did not understand during his lifetime, but after his death I discovered that I became the object of his dislike, because in giving birth to me my mother died. Had I known that my father's aversion to me was rooted in his unchanging devotion to my dead mother, I should have reverenced his unkindness, instead of rebelling at it.'

When she came to these words Diana made a grimace, which signified annoyance and disgust. She seemed as if she would

fling the book away, but restrained herself and read on.

'My mother'—so the manuscript continued—'must have been a woman that could have secured any man's devotion. Her portrait used to hang in my father's study, and before I was four years old it was my habit to steal in there, and gaze upon *her*. I believe her very life and soul descended from the canvas, and mixed with mine, for all through my childhood and youth—loveless except for her—she seemed to be at my side. She was the mother of the little child who looked up at her with wondering fondness. She was the mother of the boy, and her calm and sacred eyes were always fixed upon him, so that he could never be base or vulgar; and she was the mother of the young man, half a companion, treated with the gay tenderness with which at such a time a handsome

mother may be treated in actual life, and half worshipped, as Roman Catholics worship their Madonnas. My Madonna she was indeed—the image of all sacredness, sweetness, gentleness, and womanly love.

'Let me recall that picture. It must have been a particular whim which led the artist to paint it as he did, for I have never seen another like it, and yet it was a truly artistic piece of work. She wore a blue hat, with wide brim, and a great knot of blue at the top, while the string, looped carelessly under her left ear, streamed freely downwards. On each side three white feathers spread out, making the whole head-dress very large, as was, I suppose, the fashion of the day. Her auburn hair clustered round her temples in little curls, not stiff, but soft and graceful as the young tendrils of a vine. Here it was that the artist broke into the fancy I mentioned,

for instead of carrying out the figure in costume, he painted only the neck and the tips of the shoulders, and these without a trace of dress, all in their simple beauty, glowing as it were with lovely life. The nose was straight, the mouth—deliciously pouting, a grown man would have said—seemed to me to be always parting into a kiss for her little son, coaxing him upward to press the ripe warm loving lips. The eyes were large and blue, arched over with brows of the finest shape; and I think their clear, firm, high look gave me my first idea of a purity which dishonour could never breathe upon, and a loftiness of spirit which would not stoop from its elevation for all the world could give. That was my mother—loved, admired, adored, through her picture by her lonely child; and, indeed, I believe that my affection for her planted in me the sentiment which, for happi-

ness or pain, has been the master-passion of my life.

'I speak of a master-passion; there has been another force at work in my life, which from my earliest days has exercised an ominous control over me. I was weakly in my youth, and although I assumed in my later years an aspect of tolerable health and vigour, I never gained that robust and ingrained vitality which belongs to those who are to live long and strenuously. I went through a succession of diseases in childhood, and these complaints were mysteriously aggravated by a susceptibility to excitement, which induced fits of frequent delirium. The lightest symptoms of fever were, in my case, accompanied by visions, fancies, delirious whims, which flew across my brain with inconceivable swiftness and variety. Even my common dreams were strange,

vivid, giving glimpses of faces the like of which I had never seen, or causing me to be agitated by passions of which I knew nothing. The very life of my heart began in a dream, while I was yet a very little child. I could not have been more than six years old when I dreamed that I saw a young and beautiful woman standing beside my bed. In some marvellous way I ceased to be a child for the moment. In my dream I was a man, but —though I knew that much—I could by no means interpret the sensation I felt running in my veins, like the blood of a new delightful life. I can identify the sensation now; it was that which a grown man experiences when he looks at a lovely woman—that enamoured admiration which takes the nature captive—but how should a little child be capable of such an emotion? Alas, I was born with a fatal warmth of disposition which,

almost before infancy ended, began beating up through my constitution with prophetic energy. Shall I call such a disposition fatal? It is true that by it my life has been darkened and roughened; but its almost creative power gave me a mother in my days of childish orphanhood, and set before me in boyhood a girl clad not alone in her own pure sweet beauty, but in a thousand ideal charms which my fancy cast about her. That was your mother, my darling, who, perhaps, while I write is looking down upon her husband and her daughter—her daughter, who will never on earth know a mother's or a father's love.

'Let me not wander, for I have much to tell you. This dream-form—this visionary woman—was for years my visitor, and that in the strangest way. First, however, I must remark that about this time my sister

was born—my father having married a second time. I was a stranger in the house, no one cared for me; indeed, everyone scolded and spurned me, so that I lived something the life of a dog, who is used to kicks and hard words, and crouches in corners, grateful to the person who passes him by without a blow. Day after day, a little lonely, sorrowing child, I would creep into my father's study and look up at my mother, who always seemed to pity me, and restore me to calmness and quiet. Once —how well I remember—I met my father on the stairs, as he was going out to ride, and in my hurry to avoid him I stumbled at his feet; upon which he gave me a smart box upon the ear, and told me I was always in the way. He passed out, and I, with a bursting heart, went to cry as usual beneath my mother's picture; and here, wearied out

at last, I curled myself up in a great arm chair, and fell asleep. How long I slept I cannot tell, but awakening at the sound of voices, I saw two of the women servants standing before the fire, one of whom held a bundle in her arms. They whispered and nodded to each other for a moment, glancing at me while they did so, and at last she who held the bundle put it before me, and drawing aside a blanket, showed me my baby sister. Whether they meant to frighten me or not, I cannot tell, but I know that I screamed with terror. The child had a profusion of black hair, and the ugliest and most forbidding face I ever saw, so that, although seen only for a moment, it printed itself upon my memory with a fidelity that made it for years an image of repulsiveness and horror.'

Diana laid the book on her lap, and threw herself back in her chair with a bitter triumphant smile, and continued for a time in that attitude, pondering what she had read.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DEATH BOLTON (*continued*).

'YOUR aunt Diana'—thus the memoir went on—'will never be beautiful, but it is only justice to say that her face in girlhood and later life was not by any means such as I have described it in infancy. The shock which this sudden view of her gave me did not pass away for several years; indeed, I might rather say that the impression deepened as time went on. I must have been sickening that day for one of my feverish attacks, and no doubt my nerves were, even for me, in an unusually sensitive state. In the evening I became ill, and had to be sent to bed,

where I remained many days, and during all that time I was haunted by this hideous baby face, which—more especially in my moments of delirium—almost scared me out of my life. The room would seem to darken all of a sudden, and immediately the face, with its damp locks of raven hair, would appear above me, forcing me to scream out in an agony of fear. The fever passed off in a few days, and the vision with it, but you will not be surprised when I tell you, that in my childish way I connected the disorder with my sister, and believed that the sight of her had made me ill. Under this notion I became possessed of the most acute fear of seeing her face again, and, as I dared not confess what I felt, I passed my days in making all sorts of contrivances by which I might avert, or postpone, the dreaded sight, which I knew must sooner or later break

upon me again. Thus, from the time of her birth my sister was in my eyes an object not of love but of terror.'

(Here Diana smiled again.)

'Her very face became a horrible element of my existence. What I am going to relate will seem fanciful and impossible, but it is strictly true. For seven or eight years following, as often as I fell ill—which happened repeatedly—the feverish delirium, from which I invariably suffered, brought with it, as a symptom which recurred several times each night, that strange impression of a darkening of the room, and the presence of the face scowling down upon me, who lay motionless with fear. Nor was this all. There followed, with undeviating regularity, the appearance of that beautiful woman of which I told you just now, and from before her the hateful face would fly, and I would

lie lapped in a warm sweet light, and with an indescribable sense of safety and peace diffused through my whole being. This alternative vision repeated itself year after year, with surprising reality and identity. At last it ceased, as I thought for ever; but when I was fifteen—lying, as was believed, upon my dying bed—once more my room grew black, and I found myself shuddering beneath the old frightful face. Then, after an interval of horror, there spread before my eyes the soft light which always foreran the pleasant vision; the horror fled away, and the beautiful form and countenance which had cheered me so often bent over me again. From that hour I began to mend; but the double vision was gone, and it never returned, except once, and then indistinctly.

'I have said that my devotion to my mother's portrait implanted in me, at a

remarkably early age, a habit of admiring women. I cannot remember the time when the sight of feminine beauty did not affect me, though in a way which was then quite incomprehensible to myself. A curious accident of what I may call my early education helped to fix and strengthen this habit. When I was about nine years old, the Arabian Nights fell into my hands, and I read it greedily. To this day I trace in my tastes and feelings the influence of that singular book. These tales—as most people know—are bathed in the idea of beauty; but it is beauty either feminine or artificial, as distinguished from what is called the beauty of Nature. So far as I remember, the interests of the reader are from first to last detained within the circle of human loveliness; architecture, groves, fountains, precious stones, are indeed freely displayed before him, but

woman is the centre of all ; and woman prized and admired for her beauty's sake. Exclusion of all qualities of mind and character, except such sprightliness, constancy, or tenderness in affairs of the heart as are necessary to animate women into subjects for love-stories, is the method of the tales. This was the first work of fiction I read. It was the earliest presentation made to me of woman in her relations with man, and it affected me so powerfully that, after I had read the Arabian Nights, woman became to me—I was still a little child—a thing of beauty, a being created for delight; and the sex, thus regarded, rose gradually before me as the supreme object of life.

'I have dwelt so long upon this matter because the fact may extenuate much that will appear wilful or wild in my subsequent history. Nothing farther in my childhood is

worthy of record. My early life was never made happy. Two years after my sister, a son was born in our house, and, as my brother and sister grew older, the vexations of my home were aggravated. It was a joyful day for me when I was sent to school, and from that time the darkest periods of the year were those which most boys hail with joy, I mean the holiday seasons.

'My favourite amusement when I was at home was boating; and a small river, which in its course ran through the estate of a friend of my father, gave me an opportunity of gratifying my taste in this particular. At home no one asked where I went, or what I did, and these were pleasant days when I took my dinner with me, and spent the long golden hours from summer morning until evening upon the water. Every turn and winding of that river, every glimpse of the hills and woods,

which one saw rolling away on either side in endless variety, is depicted before me now. I have seen each view in all lights and in every sort of weather, for that river was my companion and friend during several years. There were shady spots here and there which gave delightful shelter from the sun, and in those places I have lain moored hour after hour, watching the water run by, or listening to the singing birds, in happy forgetfulness of home and its troubles. But I do not mention this river because of these recollections. It played a more important part in my life than cheering a few lonely boyish days.

'In one place the river widens out into a shallow lake-like expanse, where the bottom is gravelly, and the clear stream runs merrily over the stones. Here too the river divides for a space, making by its parting the prettiest

little island that ever was seen, and this island, you may suppose—grassy, and fragrant with wild flowers—was a favourite landing place with me. I was rowing quietly towards it one day, when I was surprised by seeing an empty boat floating down the stream in my direction. At the same time I heard a girl's voice, calling out in the most supplicating tones—

'"Oh, if you please, stop it; bring it back."

'I looked up. On the edge of the island, which measured perhaps twenty yards by five, stood a little girl, of thirteen or fourteen, as I guessed. She was dressed in white, and wore a dainty little hat, and her feet and ancles were bare—indeed, I believe she was standing in the water. It was evident that she had rowed herself across to the island, and that while she was amusing herself her boat, an old flat-bottomed barge, had slipped its cable, and was now lazily coursing down the

river, leaving her in an agony of distress. As soon as she saw me look up, she cried out again, with redoubled supplication, "Do catch it, if you please; what shall I do?"

'How proudly a youth performs his first act as deliverer of the sex which has hitherto been his guardian, if not his ruler! The opportunity was a brave one for a lad like me. I could not help stopping to admire the young girl, even before I tried to help her—she looked so pretty, standing with her dress raised cautiously, and the water still playing over her little white feet, while her face and eyes were all excitement and alarm. To secure the dull old boat, which came hulking downwards, was only the work of a moment, and very soon I towed it back to the island where the little girl, quite forgetting her naked feet, danced on the shore for joy. She had auburn hair, blue eyes, a mouth better

moulded, perhaps, to express tenderness than to illustrate the laws of beauty, but pretty enough meanwhile; in a word, she was the image of my mother, so far as I could fancy that dear being a little child. I forgot everything for a moment; I had never seen anyone so lovely before, and no doubt I seemed awkward enough.

'"Let me row you back," I managed to say at last; "you will never get over in this boat."

'"Oh, no, thank you," she answered. Her voice had a silvery ring, and she uttered each word with a clearness that struck me as remarkable in so young a person. "I can row myself quite nicely."

'"Never mind that, come with me," I said. "I shall take you over and then go back for the boat."

'She looked at me, and something in her

girlish eyes met something in my boyish eyes that set my heart beating. Then she glanced round, and, seeing we were alone, said with half a blush and half a smile: "Very well; I shall come, but you must be very quick."

'At the word she sprang into my boat, holding my hand. Until that moment she never remembered her feet, and she turned red as a rose upon seeing the condition she was in. Had I not been quite as nervous as she, I might have enjoyed her desperate attempts to cover her toes with her dress, but I felt so bashful that I had not the presence of mind even to eke out the passage; indeed, I rowed as if in a race, and put her on shore in a twinkling.

'She had to wait for her shoes and stockings until the old boat where they lay was brought over, and even then she tried to

hide her naked feet, until I, seeing her confusion, rowed away, carrying her image in my heart, enlivened by a smile which she gave as I disappeared round the bend of the river.

'From that hour I lived a new life. That little girl became the idol and the dream of my heart; and now that she is with the angels of God, it is my chief happiness to think that, during all the years which ran between that time and the moment of our final separation, I never saw beauty in any woman except when something reminded me of her; I never ceased to love her, or divided my affections with any other. And fully she repaid me. I have been what the world calls an unfortunate man, and I am now descending to an early grave, but for all that I have drunk deep of happiness; indeed, I lived too intensely to live long. Our

married life, amidst all its troubles, was a feast of ever fresh delights. Let others live after their own hearts, and be prosperous, as prosperity goes. I have had joy enough, and to spare ; my cup has run over.'

Diana read these words with the harshest of frowns, and made an impatient movement in her chair ; but she glanced at the timepiece and resumed her reading.

CHAPTER XV.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DEATH BOLTON (*continued*).

'THE records of a boyish love, however constant,' thus the manuscript continued, 'read foolishly, and I shall relate this part of my story as briefly as possible. For two years and a half I never saw my little sweetheart again, though morning and evening her form was before me. At last I met her in the street, driving with an elderly lady in an open carriage. She went by rapidly, but I had time to recognise her, and I guessed then (and knew some time after) that she also recognised me. She wore deep black and looked pale; indeed, her mother had just

died, and, like myself, she was left to the care of a father who regarded her with indifference, if not with dislike. I took care to observe the carriage and horses, and after a little inquiry discovered my dear one's name. I heard it with a leaping heart—Susan Frere. I felt as if she were already mine when I knew her name.

'She lived about two miles from the town, and by walking the road that led to her house for several hours every day I managed, during these holidays, to see her seven times. Twice she was walking, like myself, but the other glimpses were snatched as the carriage drove by. Nevertheless, I flattered myself that my admiration was no longer altogether a secret; I even thought she returned my looks with earnestness, though no doubt this was but fancy.

'I went back to school. On my next

return home I found that Miss Frere had left England, and three years elapsed before I saw her face again; but never can I forget the circumstances of that meeting. I had left school and commenced my studies at Oxford, and had there made the acquaintance of a young man of my own age, named Molton, who, without being in any remarkable degree clever or brilliant, was one of the most engaging persons I ever met. He was diminutive and very neatly built, with small delicate hands and feet; and his gay, refined address carried out in the most agreeable way the rather feminine cast of his form and features. His conduct was irreproachable; indeed, while lively and fascinating to a remarkable degree, he discovered at all suitable times a detestation of vice, which was the more marked because his ordinary manners were full of the repose which belongs

to men of high breeding. For some reason, which I never understood, he took a fancy to me when he first saw me, and was at considerable pains to get introduced to me; while for my part I was eager enough to pursue an acquaintance which was pleasing in itself, and flattered my vanity besides. Our friendship was interesting, and I recall it with that mingled pain and delight which we feel when reviewing the happy past; but I will not enlarge upon that subject. Molton asked me to visit him at his home during the vacation, and I—delighted to escape from my father's rigid supervision—accepted the invitation with joy.

'Molton's home was at the seaside, near a coast which is in places rough and rocky, but elsewhere along its rough indented line there are many small bays, where the curved beach is delightfully smooth, and the waters break

in waves of the clearest blue upon the round gravel. Nothing could be more secluded than these nooks, and when one came upon such a scene of peace and solitude, after a climb around precipitous rocks, and cliffs which frowned hundreds of feet overhead, the contrast was most picturesque and romantic. Molton was the only child of aged parents, and the house was quiet even to dulness, but the utmost freedom was accorded to a visitor, who might occupy his time as he liked best. In my case this liberty was made more complete by the fact that my friend was reading hard, and spent a considerable part of each day over his books, leaving me to walk, or ride, or fish, as my fancy led me. I enjoyed this kind of life immensely, and hardly thought that anything could increase my satisfaction, until a simple accident taught me how elastic is the scale of human happiness,

and how soon the pleasure of the most contented mind may be augmented and quickened.

'My favourite pastime was to roam along the shore, climbing round one rocky point after another, and diverting myself with slippery ascents and hair-breadth leaps, in which I considered myself to excel, having a firm foot and a quick eye. I was crossing a rugged heap of rocks covered with seaweed, and, to test my skill, resolved that in my flight I would not falter a moment, but raise one foot as soon as I put the other down. I had almost finished my exploit, and the next bound would have landed me on the smooth beach, when at an unlucky step I lost my footing, and fell with great force upon the rock, whence the next moment I rolled down upon the sand. Here I lay motionless for a while, indeed, I must have been stunned, and when

I recovered myself a little and attempted to move, I felt such excruciating pain that I was forced to cry out. I soon found that I could not rise, and exhausted with the effort and the suffering I fell back, and became unconscious again.

'It may have been a mere act of unconscious recollection—or it may have been a fragment of my old habitual vision—but, without any doubt, as I lay there, the dark horrid face that haunted my childhood seemed to swoop down upon me, like a flying bird, and vanish as swiftly as it appeared. Immediately after came the inexplicable feeling of relief and calmness, and the beautiful, familiar face gazing at me with angelic sweetness.

'But, wonderful to tell, instead of growing more shadowy as my senses slowly regathered themselves, the face became clearer and more actual. I felt warm breath upon my cheek.

My full consciousness returned, and I saw the rocks around me, and the blue sky overhead, and I heard the waves breaking close to my feet; and at last I perceived, with indescribable surprise and agitation, that there was above me—no visionary face, but—a living woman, bending down with kind and anxious eyes.

'Shall I ever forget her look? I think if every other vestige of the incidents of my life were obliterated from my memory, that face would still remain, for surely it printed itself deeper than anything beside that I ever felt or saw. A face complete in beauty—a character promised in the face—a life, foreshadowed in the expression which shone with truth and love—all this I saw in that awakening moment. I saw my wife, and in her I saw the promise of our wedded life.

'Daughter, shall I paint your mother's

countenance and her form as, swifter than thought itself it seemed, she was then disclosed to me? She seemed no other than the woman of my dreams in real flesh and blood. Auburn hair, a skin marvellously white, eyes so blue that they might have been cut out of the sky that spread above her, a mouth trembling into perfection of shape as she began to speak, a figure whose round and graceful lines seemed rather to create than to fulfil ideas of symmetry. This was the sight which greeted my returning senses. You will not be surprised to hear that I looked on in wonder and speechless admiration.

'"I saw you fall," she said; "are you very much hurt?"

'I could not answer: surprise was turning into another sensation, which completely overmastered me.

'"Can you not speak?" she continued; "what can I do for you? try to answer me."

'Little the kind creature guessed what it was that held my breath, and almost my reason, in suspense; and when I spoke at last—faintly, and not yet, I suppose, with full consciousness—she had good reason for surprise.

'"Susan," I gasped, "where have you come from?"

'She drew back in amazement, but the next moment I saw that she recognised me, and the colour that overspread her lovely face told me, somehow, that her heart was mine.'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DEATH BOLTON (*continued*).

DIANA, with an air of great austerity, peeped at the two or three leaves immediately succeeding, and turned them over contemptuously, resuming the narrative at the point where it appeared to her that the outburst of sentiment had spent its greatest force.

'Miss Frere—let me give her that name for once—was visiting friends who lived about a mile off, and who, being new-comers, had not yet made the acquaintance of the Moltons, a fact which was fortunate rather than the contrary for us, as lovers. She, like myself, had several hours in each day at her

own disposal, and I leave you to guess how—yielding to my persuasion—she spent those happy intervals. Poor girl, in response to my first transports, she confessed more than was prudent, and once in the possession of the secret of her heart, I took advantage of my knowledge, and so pressed her that she granted me many an interview which cost her dear sensitive conscience painful misgivings. Her ties of duty were not, perhaps, so strong as those of many a daughter, but she had a profound sense of honour, and I believe there was a tinge of bitterness for her even in the rapture of those early meetings. There was no such bitterness for me. Golden days of one and twenty! After all, when every credit has been given to strength of will and constancy of affection, the hard fact remains, that love thrives best in an ideal world. Pounds, shillings, and pence—cares—the

battle of life, in short, and the sober experience which it brings—are not the atmosphere in which love breathes freely. It is in youth, when sorrow is far away, and the capacities for enjoyment are fresh, and the colours of imagination untarnished by contact with reality—then we know what it is to love. The affections which in later life are usually divided among children or friends flow in all their sweetness and strength towards one being only. Bright world of early love! From its blissful precincts sorrow and sighing flee away. Why has the sea for me a music which may change its note but is always full of deep harmonies? It must be because while Susan and I made love we were listening all the time to the ever-changing music of the waves. When they broke softly on the shore, where we sat hand in hand, the voice of the waters seemed to mingle with my own, and

carry the words in which I told my love into her ears ; and once or twice when the weather was stormy we walked that beach together, and as the billows beat upon the rocks, and shot up in pillars of spray, she would cling closer to my side. The sea was our companion as we made love, and a suggestive companion we found it.

'Her mother, as I have already told you, had been dead for some years, and her father having lately married again, her home, like my own, was unhappy. Of course we condoled with each other, and the similarity of our troubles drew us more closely together. Indeed, I progressed with the audacity of youth and inexperience, and before our acquaintance was a week old I had asked her to be my wife. Here our difficulties began. I told my friend Molton the whole story, and he, while showing the warmest interest in

the affair, pointed out to me the imprudence of pursuing an attachment in this secret way. His knowledge of life far exceeded my own, and he conveyed his opinions in the most delicate manner, so that I could not but listen to his advice. He urged that, when I returned to my home, I should ignore this accidental and temporary acquaintance, and obtain an introduction to Miss Frere in an ordinary way; and then communicate the fact of my affection for her, first to my own father and then to hers. I fell in with this suggestion the more readily because the mere mention of it seemed to relieve my darling from a thousand perplexities and fears, and, having arranged all, and the time fixed for my return to my home being come, we met for one parting walk and talk, at the scene of our first encounter and interview.

Susan's step-mother had joined her two

or three days before, and, as subsequently appeared, she found out, or at least began to suspect, that her daughter had a secret. Mrs. Frere was an officer's child, and from her youth had been notorious for two qualities—an ungovernable temper, and an ardent desire for a husband. Until she was forty-five, in spite of a series of flirtations carried out in a truly military spirit, she did not attain to the state of matrimony, and no doubt this delay had served to exasperate the natural severity of her disposition. When at last she became mistress of a family, she was a mistress indeed. Stories were circulated a few years later which told how the lady, in her more exalted moods, would flourish a carving-knife around the face of her lord and master, because he failed to see her point in an argument; and in other respects she conducted herself so violently,

that he—who was by no means a craven-spirited man—quailed before her. She was handsome, strongly built, and her colour was high, appearing on each cheek in a large irregular patch, with uneven edges, like a flag which had been tattered in successive actions. At the particular juncture I have just described this terrible woman became the spy upon our courtship, and unhappily she came upon us at the very tenderest moment of our leave taking. I shall not try to describe the scene that followed. Mrs. Frere, exulting in her discovery, but inflamed with rage, swept the weeping girl from my side, refusing with the utmost scorn to listen to my explanations, and pouring upon me a volley of reproaches and threats. Susan, overwhelmed with terror, did not dare to look up, and so for the time we parted.

'With a thousand heroical projects in my

mind for the rescue of my beloved one, I returned to Molton's home, where I told him the story of our misfortune. His advice was as usual calm and sensible, and he added to it the great kindness of accompanying me to Warcaster to help me through my approaching trial.

'If Mrs. Frere had been capable of cool reflection, she would have perceived that her discovery was one which might be turned to a useful end. She wished above all things to get her step-daughter married, so as to rid herself of an incumbrance, and it ought to have occurred to her that a match between Susan and myself was not an unreasonable idea, though perhaps premature. She would not, however, for any consideration of prudence, forget or forgive the slight we had put upon her maternal dignity. We had kept a secret from her, and she, by her penetration,

had brought it to light; reparation or atonement on our part was impossible now, and she would have her revenge. Accordingly she had no sooner reached her own home than she related the whole affair to her husband, taking care to heighten the effect of her narrative by every artifice of invention and malice. In a word, she dispatched her husband to my father in a mood of the most dangerous excitement and anger, and, as you may suppose, the interview between the two was short and furious. My father at his best was snappish and overbearing, and accustomed to demand from others the most complete deference and submission. To be upbraided as Mr. Frere ventured to upbraid him was an event in his life which had few parallels or none, and he became so transported with rage that the two very nearly came to blows, and when they parted it was

upon such terms as rendered any future friendly approach impossible. In due time the remainder of my father's wrath was discharged upon my head. He swore that if I ever again exchanged a word with Miss Frere, much less entertained a thought of marrying her, my fate as his son was sealed. He did not imagine that I could resist his will, and so, refusing to hear me speak, he drove me from the room.

'Broken-hearted I went to Molton, who was staying at the hotel which is now called "The County," but was then known as the "White Horse." Molton was the most kind and consoling friend that could have been found for such an occasion. He expressed great sympathy with me, but he mingled with this many gay and hopeful remarks, all conceived and uttered in a style of gay, delicate humour, for which he was, among all the

men I have known—and all the women too—unrivalled. Insensibly, under the charm of his conversation, my spirits rose, and when he asked me to dine with him, although two hours before I had wished for the grave, I accepted the invitation cheerfully, and began to feel some signs of a coming appetite.

'What is so pleasant as sunshine after storm? To this hour I remember that cosy dinner, and the thousand lively sayings of my friend, who tried by every means to cheer and reassure me. The wines of that once renowned house were some of the best in England, and my state of mind led me to drink with imprudent freedom, while Molton, who on another occasion would have given me a gentle hint that I must not forget myself, seemed to think that this night an extra glass would not hurt me. At last, however, by a

polite device he contrived, as he believed, to draw me from the table before any harm had been done. There was a concert in the Assembly Room of the hotel that evening, and he proposed that we should enjoy the music for an hour, and upon my consenting he left the room to see about the tickets. He returned with them in his hand, and did not perceive that during his absence I had been again making free with the decanter. I still retained decent self-control, and walked with him to the concert-room, where we took our seats in the front row. No sooner had I sat down, however, than my head began to swim, and the lights danced around me. For a little while I knew that I was going to be drunk, and felt nervous and miserable, but this disagreeable sensation soon passed away, and I became no longer conscious of uneasiness, or afraid of committing any imprudence.

Hereupon ensued the scene which I shall try to relate.

'The concert was classical. Only instrumental music was permitted, and this of a severe sort. The performers occupied a raised platform, not at the end but in the centre of the room, and the company sat all round, so that everybody saw everybody. The instruments were being tuned as we took our places—how well, in spite of my swimming senses, I remember all that passed!—and their squeaking and wheezing and grunting were no doubt taken for a scientific introduction by others of the audience beside myself; for the symphony was so truly classical that I was not a little puzzled to decide when the tuning ended and the music began. This perplexity I might assign to another cause had not the facsimile of it arisen on other occasions in my life, when the confusion

could not have been complicated by wine. At present I did not attempt to listen, but amused myself with looking at the company. Straight opposite to me sat an old lady, dressed for young, and twinkling all over with diamonds. At a distance of six or eight yards I could distinguish that her hair was false, and that she was very old, very wrinkled, and very sour. Her hands were folded, and she sat erect, frowning, as I thought, on the really young and pretty women who sat around her. In some mysterious way this old lady interested me, and I watched her for a considerable time and with greater freedom than was quite proper, but indeed propriety was suspended for me during the rest of that night. After a while I turned to look at a lady who sat next but one to this glittering antiquity, and my heart leaped as I recognised Mrs. Frere. At the second glance I saw that

my Susan was sitting in the intermediate place, guarded, it appeared, by her mother and this old spangled dragon, who I learned afterwards was a widowed aunt.

'Susan wore a plain white dress, open at the neck, and her beautiful arms were bare, and without any ornament, as surely they needed none. Except for a girdle of ribbon which, after binding her waist, fell down the front of her dress, she was in all respects unadorned, and her youth and beauty were not in stronger contrast with the hag at her side than was the simplicity of her attire with the costly and artificial apparel of the other. Susan looked quite cast down, and sat with her gaze fixed on the ground, an equal picture of loveliness and grief, and as I watched her with a burning heart—from the moment I saw her I saw nothing beside—I perceived a tear running down her cheek. She brushed it

hastily away and raised her head, fearing, I suppose, that her sorrow might provoke a rebuke. As she looked up she saw me for the first time, and before she knew what she was about she had given me an indescribable glance of love.

'I was myself no longer. Wine had already exalted my spirits, and effaced conventional proprieties from my mind. The sight of Susan's tear had nearly overcome me, and this look finished the work. Caught up as it were in a whirlwind of feeling, I sprang from my seat, and bounded across the dais, upsetting the first fiddle in my course, and imparting thereby to the *presto finale* movement of the symphony an unlooked for vivacity. Hearing nothing, and seeing one object only, I threw my arms around Susan's neck, and covered her with kisses.

'Little kaleidoscope fragments of what

followed I remember, but nothing more. I saw the blood mantling her face and neck, but I caught a look from her eyes, even in her amazement and agitation, which I would not have missed for worlds. I knew that the music stopped. I saw people rising from their seats, and I heard a whole flight of ejaculations from every side. My old friend in her diamonds started up and screamed, "Keep your hands off *me*, young man!" Then Molton was at my side—and all the rest was a blank.'

CHAPTER XVII.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DEATH BOLTON (*continued*).

'THAT,' said Diana to herself, with a curling lip, 'is your account of a drunken brawl, which disgraced you, and, what was of more consequence, your family with you. If the rest of your story is not more accurate than this passage, your own Arabian Nights would scarcely surpass it for invention.' After this reflection she began to read again:

'I shall not follow out the vicissitudes of our courtship, which was a mixture of rough and smooth, such as befits true love. During the next two years I had many stolen interviews with my dear one, and was able to keep

up a tolerably regular correspondence with her, through the fidelity—or, as Mrs. Frere would have called it, the perfidy—of one of the maids. Susan's life became most unhappy. During one of our meetings she detailed to me a number of petty persecutions and miseries which she had lately undergone through the malice of her step-mother, and I seized the opportunity, and persuaded her to promise that she would fly from her home, and become my wife. At this time I was in Holy Orders, and I confess that, even under the circumstances, I was wrong to propose such a step, but we were violently in love, and had been driven to desperation. I made every preparation with the utmost secrecy, arranging that Susan should fly to a remote hamlet in Wales, where she was to live with an old woman, who had been nurse to her mother, until we could become man and wife.

She insisted on travelling by herself, to avoid scandal as far as possible, nor would she permit me to see anything of her on the day of her flight, except for a few moments. All our preparations were completed, and it was agreed that I should meet her at five o'clock in the morning with a carriage-and-pair, which was to convey her to a railway station five miles outside the city. From thence she and her faithful maid resolved to travel by themselves, and I was not to see her face again until our wedding-day. How my heart beat at the word!

'Five o'clock came, that balmy July morning, and I was in readiness at the appointed spot. A church stood hard by, and the last stroke of the hour still vibrated in the quiet air when I saw the dear girl appear. In a moment I was at her side; and seeing her bathed in tears, I poured out all the tender

assurances of coming love and happiness that the occasion and her presence could suggest. But, in the midst of my protestations, she bid me pause and listen to her. I shall never forget the inexpressible sweetness and gentleness of her manner as she took my hand.

'"I cannot go, dearest," she said. "We have been foolish to think of such a thing. Let us wait, and trust in God."

'Even to you I could not impart the secrets of her soul which she confided to me at that time. She had thought the matter over during the night, and had decided that it would be wicked to leave her home in this clandestine way. Nothing could shake her resolution, which seemed composed at once of the most delicate and the most inflexible materials. She kissed me as if she had done me an injury, and would supplicate forgiveness, but at the same time she maintained her

purpose in spite of all my arguments and entreaties. In short, she was an angel—a perfect blending of tenderness and rectitude. The morning wind that went lightly by us was not sweeter than her breath, nor the early skies purer than her guileless soul. She left me at last, and I loved her more than ever for her modesty and truth. Perhaps by her words and bearing she had cooled the feverishness of my passion, but I felt as if she was of all women the most womanly, and I vowed to myself as she vanished from my sight that my heart, which an instant before had been beating against hers, should never beat for another. It never did. Let those who will rehearse the raptures of a roving affection. I tried married love and single devotion, and tasted joys which no poet ever sung.

'Three months later we were married—against the wishes of our friends on both

sides, it is true—but still openly, and without fear of reproach. And now came the fatal mistake of my life.

'"We shall be very poor, shall we not?" my darling asked me on the evening of our wedding-day; for she was full of common sense, and would look life in the face.

'"Certainly not," cried I, assuming a spirited air.

'"I am not afraid of poverty," the dear being continued. "Do not fancy because papa's way of living is so luxurious that I cannot endure hardship. You shall find me a cheaper wife," cried she, laughingly, "than any poor curate's daughter. Plain things will be a novelty to me, and when you are a bishop I can turn fine lady again."

'I cannot describe the enchanting assurances with which she enforced her protestations that, as my companion and helper, any

kind of life would be agreeable to her. Unfortunately I dissembled with her, and, by artful phrases and glowing expectations as to my future prospects from my father, I persuaded her that we might commence a style of living which, if not positively luxurious, was yet equally above our necessities and our means. I determined that she should never know poverty, and, thank God, she never did know it; but I feel now that in not allowing her to share to the full the difficulties of her husband's life I wronged her, and irreparably injured my own prospects. However, if I did not love your mother wisely, I at least loved her well. Here in a few words let me—even if I weary you—say that no man ever had a more devoted or delightful companion. By this time she had grown more womanly in her appearance, and her figure was slightly but not ungracefully stout;

indeed, plumpness brought out more fully the singular symmetry of her neck and shoulders. Her hair was abundant, and its rich auburn, together with a skin of excessive whiteness, made a charming contrast. I have looked at your little baby features by the hour as you lie at my side, and I try to trace your mother there. Her mouth is yours—a mouth scarcely beautiful, perhaps, except to me—and you have her forehead to a nicety. God shield your face from shadow and sorrow, my darling, in the long days to come, when father as well as mother shall be far away.

'Just before my marriage I had been appointed to the vicarage of Danbury. The post was an important one; and not a little surprise was expressed that the Bishop should have promoted so young a man to it. Two things had, however, conspired to bring this about: the living was a poor one, and I had

already been favoured with the approval of my Bishop on account of what he termed my eloquence. Now let me tell you a secret. The benefice did not yield to the incumbent quite a hundred a year when the various charges were paid, and our annual expenditure was not much less than eight hundred. At the time of my marriage I was master of four thousand pounds, part of my own mother's fortune: Susan was penniless; and thus, by a simple calculation, you will see that within four years after our marriage I had reason to feel seriously anxious about our future. Twice I had tried to effect a reconciliation with my father, and each time I was received with a sort of ironical forbearance which—more than any violent speech could have done—convinced me that I had little to expect from him. All this time your mother knew nothing of my approaching embarrass-

ments, and actually imagined that we lived upon our income. I was on the point of telling her the whole truth, when the news that my father was dangerously ill opened before me a prospect of relief from my anxieties. I could neither feel nor affect deep sorrow at the thought of losing one whose only paternal relations with me had been tyrannical; and I never suspected that he would altogether disinherit me. When, after his death, I learned that he had left me only ten pounds I was petrified, and in one moment of bitter agony realised the folly of my conduct since our marriage. It was too late, however. Neither from my brother nor from my sister could I expect help, or even sympathy, for they never really loved me. I was an outcast, and ruin stared me in the face. In spite of this, however, I did not tell your mother of our misfortune. She had

begun to show symptoms of delicate health, and I postponed the dreaded disclosure from day to day, and from month to month. My stock of money was not yet exhausted, and I was compelled again to defer any revelation on the subject, when my dear girl told me that she was going to add to the cares of a wife those of a mother also.

'On the day that you were born I broke into my last hundred pounds. What a terrible disclosure hung over my darling Susan's head! How I struggled, against my breaking heart, to seem as proud as she, happy mother, felt! Fortunately, before the gloom of my thoughts became unbearable, a ray of hope appeared, and I was spared the pain of a disclosure which would have agonised your mother, and that—as the event showed—at a time when the vicissitudes of life were soon to affect her no more.

'In a letter which I wrote to my true and constant friend Molton announcing your birth I had, against my will, and without my being aware of it, discovered so great a depression of spirits, that he, whose instinct was as quick as a woman's, at once perceived that something was wrong. He hurried to me, and declared his misgivings with the most generous earnestness, and my pride and reticence could not long withstand his affectionate solicitude. I forgot my manhood and his, and, casting myself into his arms, told, amidst sobs and tears, the secret that for two years had weighed upon my heart. He comforted me with angelic tenderness; and when the violence of my anguish had abated, he made a proposal to me the generosity of which fairly took away my breath. Its nature I must not disclose even to you, for I am bound to perpetual secrecy on the subject. This, how-

ever, I may say—not for many years will you read what I am now writing—if ever you know either Molton himself, or any that bear his name, remember that your mother's last days were shielded from inexpressible grief, and—for so it will be—your own infancy and youth nourished by the goodness of your father's friend. But, to confine myself to the present incidents of my narrative, I may say that I was now enabled to postpone the disclosure of my embarrassments until a more suitable time, and to look forward to making it then under circumstances of mitigated severity. I breathed again. My spirits returned, and the fears vanished from my mind like clouds before spring sunshine. I felt assured that the same Providence which had saved my darling from this impending misery would guard her when the hour of trial again drew near. Little I thought, as I

watched her bending over her baby in all the fresh loveliness of early motherhood, how soon she was to be snatched away from earthly sorrow and joy.

'You were now six weeks old; and as your mother did not progress so rapidly as we wished, the doctor proposed a visit to the seaside, whither it was arranged we should all go together. I had made suitable arrangements for the care of my parish, and was ready to start, when a friend came to me with an important face and informed me that the Duke of Warminster, who had a valuable living to give away, had formed the intention of hearing me preach, as my name had been mentioned to him as a likely person for the vacant benefice. The next Sunday had been fixed upon by his Grace for this all-important event. Of course absence was not to be thought of. My darling was in the

utmost exaltation of spirits. She had the most unaffected and unwavering confidence in my powers, and felt as sure of the Duke's good will as if it had been already secured. She, with yourself and her maid, started for the sea, and I was to follow on Tuesday. She did not doubt but on that day she should hear the good news of my appointment from my own lips. I see her now, waving her hand as we parted, her eyes shining with pride, and joy, and hope. Sweet angel of my life! before Tuesday morning dawned she was with her Redeemer. Had she been here what different tidings would have reached her!

'I must tell you myself—lest, perhaps, in days to come some harsh tongue should describe your father's infirmity in order to cause you shame—that I had become too fond of wine. Let me explain. A drunkard, or

even intemperate, I never could be called, but frail and uneven health had led me to trust to wine for undue support. Almost insensibly I had formed the habit of spurring myself to the performance of my public duties by free use of wine. Three causes —care, weakness, especially of that sort called nervous, and heavy work—contributed to make this habit indispensable to the successful discharge of my duties in church; and whenever any particular call was made upon my voice or brain my method of replying was by "winding myself up"—to use that ungraceful phrase—with stimulants.

'On the present occasion I felt I must preach with my utmost ability, and I had but little time for preparation. The Duke was a scholar and a man of judgment, who would duly appreciate force of thought, accuracy of expression, and sound sentiment. It was

now Saturday evening, and I looked forward with some apprehension to preparing a critical sermon in so short a time. However, my companion and friend was at hand, and, with a bottle of good Burgundy at my side, I sat down at my desk and fell to work. I need not prolong the description. My sermon was not finished until two o'clock on Sunday morning, and I threw myself upon my bed for a few hours of feverish sleep.

'When I awoke in the morning my skin burned like fire and my head was beating fearfully. A cold bath, or a dose of strong tea, might have saved me. But I reasoned that, on this day of all days I must be careful not to try any unusual kind of treatment. Wine had never failed me hitherto. I resolved to trust it once more, and drank several glasses. As the hour of service drew near, feeling alarming debility and nervousness creep over

me, I drank again. I do not distinctly remember what followed. I can recall myself gazing from my study window at the church clock, in a kind of stupor; and then I remember crossing the churchyard; but all that ensued (to my shame I say it) I learned from a compassionate friend, and I shall here relate it to you. It is better that you should hear the unvarnished truth from me, than listen in after-life to a garbled and malicious story.'

Here, to Diana's great disappointment, the writing ended. It was evident that the autobiography was not yet completed. She let the book fall on her lap, and for the first time seemed to ponder what she had read with an air of genuine interest. Her reverie was a long one, but it was disturbed by a knock at the door, and, looking up, she saw her visitor of the previous evening. He

bowed to her with more deference than ever, and stood waiting for her to speak.

'You said that you were Mr. Death Bolton's churchwarden, I believe?' said Diana.

'One of them, ma'am,' replied he. 'Vicar's churchwarden.'

'Be so good as to tell me,' continued Diana, with the utmost composure, 'the full particulars of his going into church in a state of intoxication.'

The honest churchwarden blushed as if the offence had been his own.

'You heard of that misfortune then, ma'am?' said he. 'Perhaps nothing of all his kindness and goodness in this parish has reached your ears, only this one unhappy accident.'

'You may imagine,' said Diana, 'that I, as his sister, am anxious to learn all par-

ticulars of such an occurrence. Please let me hear them without any comments of your own. He was drunk, to begin with. What followed?'

In spite of his humility the churchwarden darted an angry glance at the lady; but, like one who had the instinct of obedience in him, he took a seat with a nervous air, and began to speak.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TOTAL ABSTAINER.

'THE story,' said the churchwarden, 'is simple and easily told. Had it not been that in this parish, as everywhere, there are people who delight in malice, the whole affair might have been hushed up. It was an accident, and nothing more. Mr. Bolton had, on short notice, to preach an important sermon, and he was already exhausted with work and anxiety. Feeling somewhat faint when the hour of service approached, he took a little wine, and, as he had eaten no breakfast, this produced a most extraordinary effect upon him. The moment he came into

the vestry, where myself and three other friends were waiting for him, we saw that something was wrong. His face was flushed, and his voice thick, and as he tried to speak he sank or fell into a chair, helpless and almost unconscious. At first we thought he was in a fit, but the real state of the case became evident very shortly. Of course we felt agitated. No other clergyman could be found, and the congregation were already assembled for service; and the Duke of Warminster, who was coming for the purpose of hearing the vicar preach, had just been shown into a seat. Nothing, however, could be done, and we had to dismiss the congregation. When all was quiet, we carried the vicar across to this house, and put him to bed, and I assure you, ma'am—so much is he beloved—that not one of us would even whisper to the other that the vicar was intoxicated,

though we all knew it. We talked about illness—sudden illness—and even tried to think it might have been so. But the story got wind in spite of us, and the vicar's character was blasted.

'Mr. Bolton is the kindest of men, but he is ruined, ma'am—ruined. He knew it too, as soon as he came to himself, and a broken-hearted man he was; though even then, all his care was for his good lady, not for himself. He did not know that his regrets on her account were vain; but so it was. Before that Sunday night closed, she had got beyond the reach of scandal and wicked tongues; for, having met with a slight accident on her journey, through a runaway horse, she was seized with an attack of heart-complaint, and died before the doctor could get to the house. She was weak, and the shock had been too much for her. I was with the vicar when the

news came in; but I had better not describe that scene, ma'am.'

'Thank you,' said Diana; 'there is no occasion.'

'Grief gave him the finishing stroke,' continued the good churchwarden, so wrapt up in his story that he did not notice Diana's stony face: 'the same evening he was taken ill with bleeding from the lungs, and after two or three days, when the blood had stopped a little, the doctors held a consultation, and found that his lungs were partly gone already. He could not attend his lady's funeral, but a friend went for him—one Mr. Molton—who came to see him as soon as he heard of his illness; and I took the liberty of asking that I might be there. I believe we were both real mourners. It was a trying day for the vicar, but he got through it wonderfully, and the baby seemed to comfort him. He lay in

bed for a fortnight, and then one day the doctor, seeing how weak he was, recommended him to take a little wine. "I am dying, am I not?" said he, looking the doctor full in the face.

'The other hesitated.

'"Don't be afraid to tell me," cried the vicar, "am I to die or live?"

'"You will not live," said the doctor.

'There stood by the bed a small table upon which was a decanter filled with brandy, and right opposite was a large looking-glass. The vicar said not a word, but he snatched up the decanter, and sent it flying into the glass with a fearful crash. The doctor leaped from his seat, and, thinking his patient was mad, made as if he would hold him down in the bed. The vicar smiled, quietly enough.

'"Don't be frightened, doctor," he said.

'"What have you done that for?" asked

the doctor, looking at the shivered glass, down which the brandy was dripping.

'"To make a mark on my mind," answered the vicar, who was far more composed than the other. "I am to die; that is settled; and another drop of wine or brandy shall never cross my lips, if all the doctors in England bid me take it."'

'That was bravely done!' cried Diana, with a face that flashed admiration. 'If he had been more like that through life——'

'He was gentle, ma'am—gentle as a woman; but he had the lion in him for all that,' said the churchwarden. 'Well, there is little farther to tell. His friend, Mr. Molton, has been here ever since, and spends hours with him every day. But he is sinking, ma'am—sinking fast; and I made bold to ask you to come to him, because I know how short his time is.'

'You did well,' remarked Diana, 'and I am obliged to you.'

As she spoke the door was opened again, and a lady entered the room, followed by a gentleman. Diana looked up. Madeline and Hercules stood before her.

Diana's face, which had been a little softened, grew furious at this sight, and rising from her seat she put her chair before her, and glared at the intruders as from behind a parapet. Hercules turned excessively red, and tried to clear his throat in a pompous way, but he was evidently frightened and confused. Madeline, however, had more nerve, and better breeding.

'This is a surprise to us all, I suppose,' said she, advancing to Diana, and holding out her hand; 'let us try to make it an agreeable one.'

'I don't know you,' cried Diana, savagely,

dropping her hands at her sides, and standing like a statue.

'I am sorry if I have made a mistake,' said Madeline. And then, feeling she had done enough, she sat down calmly, to the great exasperation of Diana, who felt awkward in any quarrel where civility was maintained unbroken. No sarcasm would have stung her so deeply as this quiet retort of propriety upon rudeness.

'Diana,' said Hercules, approaching her with a diffident and even apprehensive air, 'let me beg you——'

'I don't know you either,' she screamed, stamping her foot. 'You were my brother once. I disown you. Never speak to me again.'

It was a painful moment, and the poor churchwarden looked as if he meditated flight; but just at this juncture the door was opened

once more, and a stranger to the Boltons entered the room. He was small and slight, but remarkably handsome, and he saluted them with a politeness which was not any the less graceful for being grave, and even severe.

'You have come to see your brother,' he said. 'I am glad there has been no farther delay, for I do not think he has many days to live.'

'People must judge for themselves as to their engagements,' said Diana. 'I could not come before. Business must be attended to.'

Molton bowed.

'I hope you will not think that I assume too much in your brother's house,' he said. 'My friend is very, very feeble, and he wishes me to remain at his side during his interviews with you. I hope my presence will not be disagreeable.'

'I have nothing to say,' replied Diana, 'that might not be said before the whole town.'

Molton bowed again and left the room, saying that he would see if his friend was awake, and equal to an interview.

CHAPTER XIX.

HER FATHER'S CHOICE.

When Diana entered the sick-room she found her brother lying upon his bed, partly dressed, and with the cradle in which his baby daughter slept close at his side. Molton was in the room, but appeared to be occupied at a writing-table which stood in the window. Death looked fearfully pale, and the few movements he made were feeble and painful; but, with the sweet courtesy which was a part of his nature, he welcomed his sister gracefully. How the two sprang from the same father might have been a curious

question for a philosopher learned in the science of descent. Even in his prostration Death smiled upon his sister, and tried to say something about his pleasure at seeing her in his house; but she, quite unaffected by his gentleness or his pitiable weakness, walked up to his bedside, and there took her stand, with no more sign of feeling than if she had been a figure of whalebone.

'You are surprised to see me,' she began, in a voice so loud and harsh that Molton glanced up from his writing.

'I am pleased as well,' said Death. 'I hope you find the house comfortable, and that you have everything you require.'

'My wants are few,' replied Diana.

'It is kind to come to see me now,' said Death, laying emphasis on the last word, as if he signified that all the past might be forgotten.

'I come here on business,' she answered. 'Let me be quite plain with you, Death. I promised my father that I never would befriend you, and I never will.'

A look of unspeakable sorrow crossed Death's face, but the sorrow was such as Diana could not understand. Meanwhile she noticed that Molton glanced up again, and this time with an impatient movement.

'You chose your road in life,' continued Diana, 'and you chose it in defiance of your father. You are coming to the end now, and are able to see your folly without my pointing it out. Besides, this is scarcely the time to dwell upon such matters. You are near your death——'

'Really, I think——' Molton cried, starting up. But Diana interrupted him:

'I thought my brother knew the truth. In any case he ought to know it.'

'Don't be uneasy, Harry,' said Death, with a faint smile; 'I understand my sister.'

'I came here,' she continued, when Molton had resumed his seat, 'to make a proposal to you. I have thrown off Hercules, as you perhaps know, and I have a large fortune to dispose of. After your death I shall adopt your daughter'—here Diana touched the cradle with her foot—'and she shall inherit the family wealth. What do you say?'

Death looked perplexed and troubled, and did not reply with the alacrity which might have been expected.

'How long will it take you to make up your mind?' asked Diana, finding that he kept silence. 'I should have thought the offer one to be snapped at.'

'Diana,' said Death, gazing at her with a quiet earnest look which somehow made her

feel uneasy even in her hardness, 'I have already found a guardian for my little girl. My friend here will watch over her.'

'Will your friend make her the heiress of fifty or seventy thousand pounds?' demanded Diana.

'No,' replied Death in a slow, thoughtful way, as if he pondered every word he spoke. 'Let me ask, Diana, if I consent to this proposal, will you allow him to share an equal guardianship with yourself?'

'Most certainly not,' Diana replied in a clinching voice.

'And will you instruct my child in all your particular opinions, and teach her the views of life and religion which you yourself entertain?' continued Death, in the same grave, cautious way.

'Most certainly I shall,' she answered again. 'It is for the special purpose of

training her in these opinions, as you call them, that I wish to obtain control over her.'

'In that case, Diana,' said Death, 'there is an end of the matter. I thank you for your honourable frankness in stating your intentions; and for your kind designs for my baby's future I thank you also. But she must be brought up in the faith in which her mother and her father lived and died.'

Diana made a grimace.

'This is a time for plain speaking, Death,' she said. 'Have you ever asked yourself what is the practical relation between this faith and the life which goes on coincidently with it? Why should we mince matters? You lived in this faith, and are going to die in it, you say; but remember you are dying a drunkard's death.'

'Once for all, I declare,' cried Molton,

fairly leaping from his chair, 'I will not allow——'

He was interrupted, this time by his friend.

'Leave my sister to me,' said Death, whose voice grew suddenly stronger. 'Diana,' he cried, turning on her a look in which pity and contempt were mixed, 'I had rather die a drunkard's death than live and have the tongue that could utter such a speech as that you have just made.'

At this point Hercules came into the room. He advanced to his brother's bedside, and seemed at least to try to express some feeling in a face not used to that sort of work. 'I am sorry to find you so poorly,' he said, taking his brother's hand. 'I ought to have come to see you before now, and I would have done so, had I known your state. Upon my soul I would.'

Death looked up at his brother with eyes quite full of tears, and his lips quivered with emotion. He tried to speak, but, failing in the attempt, took the hand of Hercules in his own, and kissed it as if it had been the hand of a woman whom he loved.

'There, old fellow—there,' said Hercules gently; for although he could not by any means interpret Death's gush of feeling, the sight of it lifted him into a higher mood; 'you must not distress yourself. We never got on as boys, you know, but we are men now, and forget all that.'

Even the selfish Hercules found himself bending over his brother, trying to cheer him. Those whose natures are noble and finely cast, have but to live to raise others to their level, for a time at least. Molton hid his face in his hands, while affecting to be busy

with his letter. Diana alone stood unmoved and unmovable.

'It is time for me to take my leave,' she said. 'I have done what I had to do.'

'I hope then,' said Hercules, releasing his hand from his brother's grasp, 'that you have acted kindly to Death.'

'I tried to act kindly to his child, but I was not permitted to do so,' she replied. 'A mistake has been made—there is, however, time to repair it.' She looked at the sick man and paused.

'I cannot consent,' answered Death, who seemed suddenly to grow feeble again. 'Say no more about it.'

'Let it be so,' said Diana; and she walked out of the room.

'What did she want to do?' inquired Hercules, addressing Molton for the first time.

Molton was about to explain, when a sudden exclamation from Death called him to the bedside. Overcome by weakness and excitement he was sinking into a swoon, and everything else was forgotten by Molton, whose sole thought was to reanimate his friend; for already on two occasions Death had nearly expired in a fainting fit. Quite an hour elapsed before he was restored, and when Hercules went down stairs he found that his sister had already departed—of course without taking any notice of Madeline.

CHAPTER XX.

SOLD INTO EGYPT.

THREE weeks after this interview Death Bolton breathed his last. His friend Molton remained with him to the end, and when Hercules came to the funeral he found that by his brother's will Molton was appointed sole executor, and guardian of the little baby girl. To Hercules, who made a pretty shrewd guess as to the state of Death's affairs, this was far from being a disappointment: the child would have been an encumbrance, and winding-up the estate could not have been an agreeable task. So Hercules would not regard this arrangement as any affront, but

accepted it thankfully, like a man of the world. He looked into his brother's grave with an expression of momentary sorrow, and then—having bid Molton a courteous good-bye—went his way, and forgot from that hour that he ever had a brother, or that he had still a niece who bore his name.

His own life soon became overcast. A fate which seemed to hang over the wives of the house of Bolton sent Madeline also to an early grave. About a year after the death of her brother-in-law she died herself, and with her a little daughter to whom she had just given birth; and Hercules was left with one son, who was then three years old. Contrary to the expectations of his friends he did not marry again, but lived on in Warcaster, finding such companionship as he required at his clubs, and rather shunning society, especially the society of women. He

grew more pompous and empty and selfish as time went on; and but that his son kept something in the shape of affection alive in his heart, he would have sunk into an egotist of the worst type. He was proud of his boy, however, and to say the truth the boy was handsome, clever, and generally promising; and as everybody declared that young Penruddocke had a future before him, Hercules was quite content to believe it. Knowing that he was not clever himself, he took comfort in the reflection that he had deputed his son to discharge his intellectual obligations to society. He spared no expense upon his boy's education, and had perception enough to see that the money he spent was not thrown away; and as for the lad, though he was self-indulgent and luxurious in his habits, he plied his book meanwhile, and all his teachers praised him. His character, too, had traits which were attractive,

and might become excellent. His sympathies were quick and his tastes refined, and he tried very hard to be a gentlemanly boy; but his companions said that, for all his airs, Penruddocke Bolton could play you a low trick, if it suited his purpose.

The boy was fifteen when his father, who was a greedy and speculating man, and had made several rash financial ventures, found that his property was fast turning into worthless paper. Hercules Bolton did in this emergency what many a heady man did before him: he converted his withering shares and bonds into other sorts of stock, framed to delude the unwary and seduce the desperate by the promise of frantic percentages. His affairs, having gone so far in the regular course, pursued it to the end. The new investments went the way of the old, and Hercules saw beggary staring him in the face.

At this juncture his thoughts turned to Diana. For more than ten years he had heard nothing of her, and he had good reasons for fearing that by this time she might have shrunk into some secret place, where she could not be discovered. She had left England twelve years ago with the expressed intention of living and dying in a foreign land; and when Hercules, quite by accident, heard of her about two years after her departure, she was living in a small village on the skirts of Rouen. To that address he now wrote, scarcely hoping that the letter would ever reach her, but to his surprise he received an immediate reply. The hand was unmistakable even on the envelope, though a remarkable change had passed over it; for instead of being straight and vigorous, it was laboured, as if written in pain. Indeed, in one of her short sentences, Diana said that she had been at

the point of death, and was now but slowly recovering. Hereupon the letter turned to business, and as she was a woman of the fewest words, her own will best serve the purpose of our narrative.

'You are insolvent, you say: I wonder you have not been so long ago. You want me to help you, and I will do it on one condition. Your son is now but fifteen, and whatever vices his education may have implanted cannot be ineradicable. I require you to surrender his future instruction, and the whole concerns of his future life, absolutely into my hands. He may spend two separate months in the year with you, but during that time, as at every other, the tutor whom I shall select to superintend his education must remain with him. That person will receive instructions from me from time to time, and he will be, besides, one in whom I can place

independent confidence. Your son shall never see me, nor I him; while as to yourself, if I ever learn that you make the slightest attempt, direct or indirect, to visit me, or to know anything about me, you shall at once and for ever forfeit my favour, and shall find yourself a bankrupt indeed. You may write to me as often as you please at this address: if I should be away from the place, your letters will be forwarded to me.

'Subject to your obedient fulfilment of these conditions, I shall make you an allowance of fifteen hundred a year, and take upon myself the entire expense of my nephew's maintenance and education. The money shall be paid quarterly, and in case of my death you will not be left penniless. But, remember, you are to act with implicit obedience in all the particulars I have now laid down, or may lay down in time to come.

None will be unreasonable, but the smallest neglect of any will be to you the bitterest slip you have made in the course of a weak and misguided life.'

To say that Hercules accepted this proposal would be a meagre way of writing a story. He was grown stout by this time, and averse to motion, but he danced round his dining-room, waving the letter in his hand like a school-boy, or still more like a maniac. His credit was saved, for which he cared not a little. His pleasures and luxuries would be continued, for which he cared a very great deal. As to the surrender of his son, or what it might involve, he never gave that a thought. The danger had been too great, and the relief was too complete and unexpected, for any nice scrutiny of details. Hercules said 'Thank God!' to himself; and then he vowed a vow that he would never

break his contract with his sister; and thereupon, feeling that he had duly acknowledged his good fortune in all proper quarters, he became once more the dull, self-sufficient, well-fed, and selfish man he had been in the days of his prosperity.

The engagement on both sides was punctually fulfilled in all its articles, and now time went on its even way. Diana wrote occasionally to her brother, and regularly to her nephew, but neither ever saw her; and thus year ran after year, until more than twenty had shed their blossoms and their rain upon the grave where Death and Susan Bolton were lying side by side.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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